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THE NEXT INSTANT DANTE, THE CHIEF, WAS PULLED TO THE EARTH WITH THE COIL TIGHTENING
AROUND HIS NECK.

The Masked Avenger;

OR,

DEATH ON THE TRAIL.

A Tale of the Southwest Frontier.

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM,
AUTHOR OF "ADVENTURES OF BUFFALO BILL,"
"WILD BILL," "TEXAS JACK," "WHITE
BEAVER," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE DEATH-SHOT.

A BIVOUAC of bandits! A wild, picturesque scene, never beheld except on the far frontier, where civilization's footprints have left few traces, or in the wildest recesses of Mexican scenery, where the robber and the renegade, the Comanche and the wild beast have their haunts.

An encampment of robbers! men outlawed from the marts of the world where honesty is enthroned; men who have dyed their hands in human blood, and bartered their souls to Satan.

A motley group, a commingling of nationalities, for the freeborn American, the Emerald Islander, the swarthy Spaniard, dusky Mexican, fair-faced Englishman, and fierce Comanche were all present; and robed in as many costumes as the nations they represented—with the buck-skin suit and handsome Mexican dress predominating—they presented to the eye a strange, fascinating picture, in accord with the dangerous life they led in preying upon their fellow-men.

The encampment was well chosen, fronting the clear waters of a beautiful river in Southwestern Texas, and surrounded by forest-clad hills that sheltered the little valley, lovely in nature's repose until its quietude was broken by the rude bivouac of the outlaws, whose wild halloo, harsh laughter, and camp-songs startled the echoes of the woodland retreat, and scared from their coverts the denizens of those leafy and moss-carpeted aisles.

The band of outlaws, numbering some hundred horsemen, appeared to be on the march, for their encampment was evidently but temporary, as arrangements were making for a night's halt only.

Feeding along the river-banks were the horses and pack-mules, picketed by long trail-ropes, while their saddles and accouterments lay nearby, ready for instant use.

In the camp proper, a number of fires were blazing cheerily, and around them were grouped the outlaws, preparing their evening meal, smoking, sleeping or chattering, just as their humors prompted them, while, leaning against trees, or suspended from low-drooping branches, hung rifles, pistols, knives, and a few swords.

The Indian members of the band huddled together at one end of the encampment, quietly attending to their duties; the Spaniards and Mexicans formed the center group, conversing loudly in their native tongues, while the Americans, with their allies from the "isles across the

sea," were assembled at the other end of the camp; that they were the ruling spirits of the reckless free rovers was evident, for in their midst were some splendid specimens of manhood, from the ex-army officer, and the denizen of the city, to the Indian-fighter, the hardy mountaineer, and bold trapper.

In the background of the scene was another group, but much smaller than the others, for only half a dozen persons composed it, and a glance was sufficient to show that they were the commanders of the band. Even in that wild community a certain law and order reigned, for both were enforced with a deadly hand, and disobedience meant instant death.

The center of the small group was a man of apparently thirty-five years of age, and whose appearance would have been most striking whether in the blaze of a ball-room, in the halls of Congress, or at the head of an army.

His brow was massive, and stamped with a bold intellect, while heavy waves of black hair fell upon his shoulders in a graceful, *neglige* manner; though sunburned, the face was pale, the eyes dark-gray and full of a bitter, cruel fire, that glittered with a deadly light when in excitement, while the heavy brow and long lashes gave them a somber look, that appeared as if some bygone evil memory was ever shadowed before them.

The mouth was well formed, daring to recklessness in expression, and when in conversation displayed two rows of even, milk-white teeth, that added a threatening, instead of a cheerful, expression to the foreboding, cynical, yet strangely fascinating face, which was beardless, and on that account more youthful looking.

The form was well molded, six feet in height, and clad in the picturesque costume of Mexico, manufactured from the finest fabrics the country could boast, while a single gold star glittering on his left breast, and a smaller one looping up the gold cord encircling his broad sombrero, indicated his rank as chief of that wild band of outlaws.

Such was Dante, the outlaw leader, whose fame was known far and wide throughout the Southwest, as a man of terrible passions, untiring vengeance, and a most deadly foe to civilization.

Three years before, he had fled to the Far West, to escape punishment for some crime, so it was said, and organizing a band of lawless spirits he had waged a war relentless in its cruelty, alike on the Mexican and the Texan, the hacienda and the unprotected town, and with the defiant motto, "No mercy asked, or shown," he had become feared, and looked upon as an incarnate demon.

The five companions near the chief consisted of two Mexicans, whose dress and appearance indicated that they were not outlaws, but doubtless men of wealth and standing outwardly, in the community in which they resided, whatever they might be secretly; a free-and-easy mountaineer, dressed in a suit of buckskin, and acting as confidential ally, scout and guide to the chief; while the other two were officers of the band, dressed like their leader, but wearing on the left breast and sombreros silver instead of gold stars as indicative of their rank.

The senior of the two was a man of forty, with a low and evil face, burly form, and demoniacal

in his cruelty. Hating everybody and everything, he was respectful only to his chief, who, he boasted, was the only living man he feared, and to make up for this weakness, as he called it, the bully was ever ready to seek a quarrel with others, which was certain to be followed by bloodshed, for Red La Roche, as he was known, first on account of his fiery red hair, face and beard, and afterward for reason of his barbarous murders and cruelties, was noted as a dead-shot, and the worst hand in the country in a close encounter with the bowie-knife.

The junior in rank, as well as in years, was totally the opposite of Red La Roche, for, hardly more than twenty-one, he appeared ill-suited to the scenes in which he was a daily participant.

Slight in form, fair as a woman, with dark-blue eyes, short, curling hair, a beautiful, rather than a handsome, face, he seemed out of place amid those degenerate men, and yet his courage was never doubted, for in many a deadly encounter had he proven it, while as a horseman and shot Ford Balfour ranked with the first men on the frontier.

The conversation of the party had turned upon a recent disastrous attack made upon the band by a company of Texas Rangers, wherein a body of the outlaws, under command of their young lieutenant, Ford Balfour, had been surprised in camp and most severely handled, ere they could escape in hasty flight.

"If the chief will trust such boys in command, senor, he cannot expect otherwise than we will meet with defeat," said Red La Roche, addressing himself to one of the Mexicans.

"I look upon my young friend here as a good officer, La Roche," remarked Dante, quietly, and in the tones of his voice there was a peculiar depth and sternness.

"Yet he commands men far his superior, chief," insisted the senior officer, with a wicked look at Ford Balfour, who had showed no emotion at the words of the ruffian.

"Have a care, La Roche," said the chief, sternly, and then he continued:

"Balfour is most useful to me in his way; and so are you—when I need any very dirty work done."

The red face of La Loche flushed redder, and then paled quickly; but biting his lips to keep back his anger, he muttered:

"Doubtless he might be made more useful, if he had more pluck."

"Ha! ha! you are jealous of the good looks and popularity of Balfour, La Roche," laughed Dante; and his mocking tones wrought his lieutenant up to a frenzy, as springing to his feet, he shouted:

"Jealous of that baby-faced boy! Why, did he offend me, I would treat him as though he were a child."

"Red La Roche, I have listened to your insults sufficiently long. You call me a boy, and doubt my pluck, so I dare you to meet me in a fair combat." And the young officer confronted the burly ruffian.

With a wild look of rage, Red La Roche turned upon the youth, while he half drew from his scabbard the glittering bowie-knife he had often used with such terrible effect. But ere he

could grasp it in his hand firmly, the loud voice of the chief shouted forth:

"Hold!"

Springing to his feet, Dante stepped between the angry men, his face livid, his brow darkening; but in calm tones he said:

"La Roche, I have long known your animosity toward Balfour, and wondered at his allowing your insults.

"Now, he has resented your implication against his courage, and dared you to meet him; and, by Heaven! you shall; but not with that villainous-looking knife of yours."

"I will meet him any way he will fight me."

"So be it. We have yet an hour of sunlight. Balfour, look to your arms, and we will adjourn to that open space beyond our horses, and with pistols, at twenty paces, you shall fight.

"I am willing, chief. Let Red La Roche follow me to the spot," said Ford Balfour; and together the party started for the place indicated by Dante.

A few of the band had heard the quarrel between their lieutenants, and the news rapidly spread through the encampment, so that, by the time the combatants had arrived upon the ground chosen for the conflict, every outlaw was assembled, anxious to witness the play, and in their hearts hoping that Balfour would be successful, for Red La Roche was hated and feared by most of the men.

"Senors, this sport will greatly relieve the time which I was anxious to while away pleasantly, and Balfour has done us a great service in resenting the insults of La Roche," said the chief, addressing the Mexicans, as the party reached the spot; and then, turning toward the combatants, he continued:

"Gentlemen, twenty paces apart. There now; I will give the word, and you must walk toward each other, firing as you go."

Delighted at the prospect of slaying Balfour, whom he hated from the bottom of his heart, but for what reason he could not tell, Red La Roche took his stand, his pistol in hand, while his youthful and brave antagonist, after addressing a few words in a low tone to his chief, walked toward the position assigned him, and upon his handsome face there rested no sign of trepidation.

All being in readiness, the chief took a position to one side, and his deep voice asked, sternly:

"Are you ready?"

Ere an answer could be returned there came the distant report of a rifle; a small puff of smoke broke from the green foliage on the hillside, and with a cry of agony, Red La Roche sunk to the ground, while a stream of blood trickled from a small bullet-wound in his temple.

For an instant no one moved, for all were struck dumb by the unexpected death-shot into their midst, and then Dante sprung forward, and half-raising the form of La Roche, let it fall back, crying:

"He is dead; but who did this deed?"

The chief's eyes fell upon the line of outlaws, but ere he could again speak, there came a loud shout from the hillside, and all eyes turning in that direction, beheld a spectacle that filled them with awe and surprise.

CHAPTER II.

THE MASKED AVENGER.

THE object that met the gaze of the outlaws, and filled them with astonishment at his daring and his apparent indifference, was a horseman occupying a jutting spur of the hillside, and calmly gazing down into their midst, while he coolly loaded the rifle whose smoking muzzle had just hurled the death-shot into the brain of Red La Roche.

Devoid of foliage, the little spur of the hillside was a rocky pedestal upon which stood the horseman, for both steed and rider, being photographed against the blue sky, appeared more like statuary than objects of life, as, having reloaded his weapon, the man sat motionless in the saddle, one hand firmly holding the bridle-rein, the other grasping the deadly rifle.

The horse was large, long and clean of limb, and black as night, and arched his proud neck as if conscious of his great speed and endurance, while he nervously champed the bit, and seemed restive beneath the elegant trappings of his silver-bespangled Mexican saddle.

With regard to the rider, his appearance was striking, indeed, from the broad, gold-cord encircled sombrero upon his head, to the high boots, armed with massive silver spurs, upon his feet.

Attired in a Mexican suit of black velvet, embroidered with gold braid, and ornamented adown the sides of the pants with gilt bell-buttons, the erect and graceful form was displayed to remarkable advantage, fully exhibiting the power and agility of the man, whose face was completely hidden by a closely-fitting mask of steel, such a covering for the face as the knights of old were wont to wear when clad in full armor.

By this mask the face was concealed beyond recognition, but, through the visor a pair of flashing eyes gleamed forth and surveyed the excited crowd in the valley below.

Though his face was masked, the warlike and threatening aspect of the horseman was just the contrary, for, so to speak, he was armed to the teeth, and with a variety of weapons belonging to both barbarous and civilized warfare, from the seven-shooting rifle, and revolver of to-day, to the climetr of the East, and bow and arrow, filled quiver of the Indian.

Besides these, a long Mexican lance lay in rest across the saddle-bow, while a number of crescent-shaped missiles, known as the boomerang, and used by the natives of Australia in battle, hung by light strings to the right seat of the saddle, and where they could be instantly reached by the hand, while the bow and quiver occupied a like position upon the other side.

Upon the left of the saddle-bow, hung a small shield, formed of a wire frame, covered with raw hide, and fully strong enough to ward off an arrow, the point of a spear, or blow of a tomahawk, which was apparently the use for which it was intended.

For full a moment the almost awe-stricken band of outlaws stood in silence, gazing upon the, to them, strange apparition, and then the chief's voice cried out:

"After him, ye devils! the man who kills or captures him shall be my next lieutenant."

With a yell of demoniacal fury, the outlaws rushed away across the valley, to ascend the hill upon which the horseman still stood in silence, unmindful of the dozen rifle-bullets that whistled around him.

But, observing that his pursuers were nearly at the hillside, he raised his dark sombrero, as if in a parting salute, and, wheeling his horse, suddenly disappeared in the dense forest at his back.

Fully half the members of the band had sped away in chase of the strange horseman, but one after another, returned without tiding; until, by nightfall, every man had again assembled around the camp-fires, where the singular incident was being discussed in half a dozen different tongues.

With the indifference felt to death by the denizens of that wild region, the body of the slain lieutenant had been consigned to a hastily-dug grave, while the chief, with his immediate companions, were discussing, with considerable sang-froid, the disreputable character of the dead man.

Darkness had fallen upon valley and hill, and around the blazing fire the faces of Dante and his friends were brightly visible in the ruddy glare, and each expression of internal emotion was plainly discernible.

"Well, Balfour," said the chief, turning to his youthful lieutenant, who sat at his right hand; "Well, Balfour, the shot of that masked stranger doubtless saved your life, and otherwise aided you, for you are now next to myself in command."

"I thank you, Senor Dante, for your kindness and I am glad you do not believe me guilty of—"

"No, no; you, as well as the rest of us, never saw the fellow before, at least to our knowledge, I am convinced, for I had my eye upon the face of every member of my band, and one and all were puzzled; but, by Heaven, he was a splendid-looking creature."

"Yes, a most remarkable-looking person," said Senor Morganza.

"I hope he will not take a notion to introduce himself in a like manner again," remarked the Senor Alvez, with a shudder.

"We'll hear from him again, you hear me talk, for he ain't on our trail to kill only one man," returned the mountaineer, who was known by no other name than that of Texas Dave, and whose skill as a scout was second to that of no man on the frontier.

"No, he means mischief, whoever he may be, for his equipment was not gotten up for a short gallop, a shot, and return," replied the chief.

Hardly were the words said, when, from the darkness came a flash, revealing for a second the strange horse and rider, and the deadly bullet found its mark in the body of Senor Morganza.

With a stifled moan the Mexican fell back dead, his ears deaf to the rattle of rifle-shots ringing out to avenge him, fired in the direction from whence came the deadly bullet.

Then a silence fell upon all, followed by the challenge of the sentinel in the outskirts of the encampment, a loud, derisive laugh in answer, a stifled cry, and again no sound broke the forest stillness.

"Mr. Balfour, let the best scouts be put upon

that fellow's trail; but mark me, they must return by daylight, for we shall move early," cried the chief, his face pale with suppressed emotion; and then, as his lieutenant turned to obey the order, he bent over the prostrate form of the Senor Morganza.

"Dead! But he's no great loss! Well, Texas Dave, what is it?" and as the chief spoke the scout approached and stood before him.

"The sentinel, an Injun, was killed, also; run through with a spear, clear as a whistle."

"What! then the fellow is indeed in earnest; and by Heaven, he's not particular regarding color and nationality, for an American, Mexican and Indian have gone."

"Well, let double guards be set, and if I am needed, call me," and the chief wrapped himself in his *serape* and lay down to sleep with perfect indifference to the doom that had just been visited upon three members of his outlaw band.

Quietude again settled upon the picturesque scene, and as the hours crept away, the scouts sent in pursuit of the horseman returned to the camp, all making the same report, that in the darkness, no trail could be found, and their every effort had been unsuccessful.

Ford Balfour awaited until the last man was again in camp and had reported, and then he sought repose; but not long were his slumbers, as daylight glimmered in the east, and the bugle-call of the chief aroused the sleeping outlaws to action.

Instantly the encampment was a busy scene, all preparing for the march, for Dante was pressing forward in haste to intercept a richly-laden wagon-train, bound to Santa Fe, from the cities of the Mississippi valley.

As the sun arose above the hilltop, where, the day before, the masked horseman had been seen, the outlaw band was on the move, wending their way from their encampment, where three newly-made graves marked the last resting-place of their friends whose end had been so strangely brought about.

Placing himself at the head of his men, Dante led the way while in single file, and looking like a huge serpent, came his followers, upon whose faces there rested an anxious look, as if dreading another death-shot from the hidden coverts of the forest.

CHAPTER III.

THE WARNING.

WHEN the masked horseman fired the shot into the valley, and sent the spirit of Red La Roche to its last account, he indifferently gazed upon the scene of excitement he had caused, and coolly reloaded his rifle.

"That shot is the beginning of the end; thank God, I was just in time to save that boy. Now let them know that the Avenger is upon their trail."

So saying, in firm, deep tones, he wheeled and galloped away, just as the furious outlaws reached the base of the hill whence he had fired the fatal shot.

Riding rapidly for a few moments, he came to the rocky bed of a small rivulet, into which he urged his horse without hesitation, and was soon concealed from view by the dense foliage that everywhere sheltered his retreat.

Around him he heard the loud cries of his pursuers, but in security he remained quietly resting, though with his trusty rifle ready to visit death upon the first curious face that might peer into his hiding-place.

None, however, tracked him there, and darkness coming on, he once more ventured forth, but with exceeding caution—a caution which seemed to be entered into, also, by the intelligent and faithful steed, for each step over the hillside was taken lightly, as if in fear of striking with his iron shoe some loose stone.

Slowly and in a foreboding silence, the horseman crept nearer and nearer to the outlaw camp, his way guided by the blazing fires, which exhibited to him the erect and powerful form of the Indian sentinel, guarding the approach to the valley encampment.

Making a *detour* toward the river, he avoided the sentinel, and entering the outer line of the guards, directed his course, with the same cautious step, toward the ruddy blaze, around which sat the chief and his immediate friends.

"It is a great risk, but I will take it," murmured the horseman, as he drew rein within a hundred yards of the camp-fire, and slowly raised his rifle.

The flash, the report, and Senor Morganza was a dead man.

Gathering his reins well in hand, the horseman darted away in a different direction from the one he had come, and directly in the path of the sentinel, who, seeing him approach from the camp, knew not whether to fire or not.

Observing that the dark forms of horse and rider were sweeping rapidly down upon him, he essayed to raise his rifle and challenge; but too late. A derisive laugh answered him, while the sharp spear-head pierced his bronzed breast, and tore from it the life that the moment before had throbbed there.

"Three! This is fearful; and yet I must be merciless—I must let death haunt their trail until I am avenged," muttered the stranger, and he urged his horse forward at a pace that left all pursuit far behind.

"The plan of Dante I now understand; he is *en route* to intercept and pillage some wagon-train of traders on the Santa Fe trail, and I must circumvent him. On, Arab—on, my good steed."

Away flew horse and rider, over hill and through dale, until miles lay between them and the outlaw encampment, when, coming to a halt beneath the sheltering branches of a large tree, the masked stranger threw himself upon the greensward to rest, leaving his splendid animal to feed upon the rich grass around him.

While the Masked Avenger is sleeping off the fatigues of the day, I will transport the reader to a spot some thirty miles distant from there, and present him with other characters destined to play a conspicuous part in this story.

Upon the banks of a small stream, the morning following the death-shots of the Masked Avenger into the midst of the robber band, a party of traders were breaking up their bivouac, and preparing to set forth on their day's journey.

All was bustle and confusion, seemingly, in the encampment; but soon order came out of

chaos, and the long line of wagons commenced their march, while a band of mounted men headed the train.

This train was composed of the wagons belonging to the Santa Fe traders, a class of wild, jovial and brave fellows, generous to a fault, who are also equally as well known as the "Prairie-men"—an appellation they much prefer to the ordinary name of trader.

Also in the train were a number of emigrants, following the "star of empire," from the marts of civilization to the far frontier, and right glad were they to be able to enjoy the company of the traders in their westward march.

By sunrise the train was moving slowly along, and heading across a seemingly limitless prairie, for miles and miles of rolling hills spread before them, almost unbroken in the broad expanse.

In a rear wagon of the train, and seated by an elderly man, who held the reins, was a maiden of apparently fifteen, with a slight and graceful form, rapidly maturing into womanhood, while her face, shaded by a mass of gold-brown curls, was one of remarkable beauty.

The eyes were violet-blue, but the dark and long fringes of the eyelids made them appear almost black, while the features, though browned by the exposure on the march, were almost perfect in their regularity.

Reclining at ease, upon a bed of blankets in the wagon, was an elderly lady, evidently in ill health, for a tired look rested upon the pale and care-worn face, still handsome, although her span of years numbered fifty.

The look of perfect refinement resting upon the woman's face, proved she was out of place there in the prairies of the far Southwest, and told plainly that some misfortune had driven herself and kindred away from their fireside and civilized existence.

Of the party nothing was known by members of the train, other than that, a few weeks before, there had driven up to the traders' encampment two wagons, containing five persons, the first, Osmund Gerard, as he called himself, his wife, and their granddaughter, Edith Lynes, the maiden of fifteen.

The other wagon held the baggage of the party and two servants, a negro man and his wife.

Osmund Gerard had asked to accompany the train West, and his gentlemanly demeanor, with the lady-like appearance of his wife and Edith, soon won them friends among the traders.

The captain of the Prairie-men was a handsome, dare-devil fellow of thirty—a man of superior abilities, and who had received the advantages of a collegiate education; but his was a roving nature, and as soon as he became of age, he had roamed away from his home in New England to become a trader in the Southwest.

Answering to the name of Will Edgerton, he was soon better known among his *confreres* as "Wild Will," for no mad scene of revel, daring attack or desperate fray was complete unless Edgerton was the leader.

Thus it was that he soon became an acknowledged leader, for though his follies were numerous, his virtues kept pace with them, and a better friend, a more generous foe, or nobler fellow was not known than Wild Will Edgerton.

Bronzed by long exposure to Southern suns, winds and rains, free and easy, but ever polite in manner, and possessing a handsome face, with graceful, commanding form, Wild Will soon won hosts of friends, and Osmund Gerard and his wife, with Edith, felt at once drawn toward him, after his cordial welcome of them to the hospitalities of his encampment.

It was frequently the custom of Captain Edgerton, who was the commander of the train, to fall back as the wagons moved on in their march, and, riding by the side of the vehicle of Osmund Gerard, indulge for hours in a pleasant chat with the occupants.

Thus was he engaged the morning when the train is first presented to the reader, and in listening to his pleasant conversation the hours were passing by unheeded by his hearers, when an exclamation from Clay, the negro who drove the other wagon belonging to Mr. Gerard, caused all to turn their heads.

"What is it, Clay?" asked Captain Edgerton, suddenly wheeling his horse to the right-about.

"See!" simply said the negro, and he pointed far off across the prairie to where a single horseman could be seen coming on after them in a long, sweeping gallop.

"Who can it be?" said Wild Will, in a puzzled tone, as he lowered the glass from his eyes after a long and steady look.

"Some scout, perhaps," suggested Mr. Gerard.

"No; my scouts are all in advance, and I know neither the horse nor rider coming yonder; but let us move on, for he will soon overtake us."

And once again the wagons, which had momentarily halted, were on the march.

Half an hour more, and the strange horseman drew rein beside the wagon of Osmund Gerard, and turning toward Wild Will, asked in deep, stern tones:

"Who commands this train?"

It was the Masked Avenger, and so struck were all at his remarkable appearance that for a moment no answer was returned, and the question was repeated.

"Pardon me, sir; I do. It is not often we see a man in masquerading costume upon the prairies, and your appearance startled me. How can I serve you?"

And Wild Will politely raised his broad sombrero, while he kept his piercing eyes riveted upon the mask that hid the face of the strange man before him.

"You cannot serve me, sir, but yourself. Are you prepared to resist attack?" answered the stranger.

"We are Prairie-men, Sir Unknown, and hence ready and willing to meet our foes."

"I am glad of it, for I have come to warn you."

"Of what?"

"Dante, the guerrilla chief, and his band, over a hundred strong, are on your trail."

"Ha! How know you this?"

"It matters not; I simply tell you the truth."

"I thank you for your information; but I would know who it is that I am to thank," and

Wild Will bowed low before the strange horseman.

"If you ever hear of the Masked Avenger, then you will know that it was he who warned you to-day; other than that I cannot tell you, for both to friend and foe I must be masked," answered the stranger, politely but with firmness.

"Be it so; I seek not to penetrate your mask; but will you not share the hospitality of our bivouac to-night?—for ere long we will camp."

"Thanks; I must decline your kindness. Last night the guerrillas camped in the river fork, some thirty miles from here. *Adios.*"

Wheeling his horse suddenly and touching his sombrero, as a parting salute to Mrs. Gerard and Edith, the masked stranger dashed away across the prairie, leaving Wild Will and his companions thoroughly surprised by his remarkable appearance and incomprehensible conduct.

CHAPTER IV.

DANTE ON THE FORAY.

As the last rays of the setting sun fell across the prairie, it pierced the green foliage of an oasis, an evergreen island, as it were, in the midst of the rolling waves of green grass, the Mecca of many travelers upon the plains of the Southwest.

Within this cool resting-place the train of the Prairie-men was encamped, and as darkness settled down upon the earth, the bright fires shone more brightly, and their ruddy glare spread far out over the trackless prairie, a beacon to either friend or foe.

Soon all was prepared for the night; double guards were set, and scouts had been sent forth, for Wild Will, though reckless in the extreme of his personal safety, was ever most careful to protect the lives of those under his command, and the warning received from the Masked Avenger was not forgotten by him.

Around an isolated camp-fire were gathered the small circle of Osmund Gerard and family, and shortly after dark Wild Will joined them, and, as was their wont of late on pleasant evenings, he and Edith sung duets together, the rich tenor, and full though girlish contralto, chiming most musically together, seconded by the low accompaniment of the maiden's guitar.

As the night wore on, all became quiet in the camp; for, one by one, the travelers had sought repose, well knowing that a hard day's work lay before them in dreary miles of journeying on the morrow.

Long ere midnight it was quiet in the bivouac, and excepting a few wakeful ones and the guards, all were sleeping soundly, happy in their dreams and unmindful that danger was near—a danger that threatened their peaceful repose with a rude awakening; for off, yet miles away, upon the prairie, a long, ominous line of horsemen were slowly and cautiously approaching the encampment, guided by the still flickering embers of the camp-fires.

Unable to sleep, for a strange foreboding of coming evil had haunted him since his meeting with the Masked Avenger, Captain Edgerton had, after bidding good-night to the guards, walked forth alone upon the prairie, and unheed-

ing distance, was suddenly brought to consciousness of his danger by discovering, clearly relieved against the horizon, the form of a horseman coming toward him.

To conceal himself was impossible, and he at once prepared to meet friend or foe, when, as quick as a flash of light, the stranger was upon him, and in deep tones said:

"Hold, sir! Raise your arm and you are a dead man!"

"Ha! the masked unknown. You here?" exclaimed Wild Will, recognizing his strange companion of the morning.

"What? 'Tis you, Captain Edgerton, and alone?"

"Yes, I strolled from the camp, and beholding you alone recalled the distance I had come."

"Then mount behind me at once. Quick! for see, yonder crawls a serpent upon your camp!"

And the Masked Avenger pointed behind him to where a long, dark mass of moving forms were discernible coming across the prairie.

Wild Will hesitated a moment, and his companion continued:

"I feared you had failed to take my warning, so was on my way to your camp to place you on your guard. Quick! See, we are discovered; let us away."

Captain Edgerton needed no second urging, but hastily sprung up behind the Masked Avenger, who gave a word of encouragement to his noble horse, and away he flew across the prairie, followed by a hundred fleet racers, whose riders were urging on their steeds at the top of their speed.

Seemingly unmindful of the double weight he carried, Arab sped onward at a long, sweeping gallop, and, without urging, held his pursuers at a safe distance behind him, while his pace brought the green island encampment nearer and nearer.

"You have a noble horse, senor. Such a one I never saw before," said Wild Will, struck with the remarkable power and speed of the animal.

"He is a noble fellow, as you say, Captain Edgerton, and has saved my life often in the desert; but, here you are, near your camp, and I will leave you now."

"By no means; come within the camp—"

"Thank you, no. Should you need aid, rest assured I will not hang back. Your men are on the alert, I see. *Adios.*"

And Wild Will having sprung to the ground, the strange horseman wheeled suddenly and dashed away like an arrow in the opposite direction from which the outlaws were approaching.

Captain Edgerton had no time to think over the strange conduct of his companion, for the yelling demons were but a few hundred yards distant, rushing upon the camp with terrific speed, and threatening instant destruction to all before them; so, after a glance in the direction in which the Avenger had disappeared, and another toward his enemies, he started at a rapid run, and was now safe within his own lines.

"Every man to his post! Aim well and fire, for Dante's demons are upon you!" he cried, in ringing tones; and with a wild cheer the traders, teamsters, scouts and emigrants, one and all, rushed to the nearest places of defense.

The outlaws had, in the mean time, drawn rein just out of rifle range, and finding that they had been discovered, were discussing the best means of attack.

"They are prepared to resist us, that's certain. Well, let us to work, and mind you, men, I will not be balked in the capture of this train. Where is Balfour?"

"Here I am. What would you?" and the young lieutenant rode up.

"I would have you take the mountaineers and scouts and move on yonder encampment. Let Texas Dave lead the Indians, and I will follow with the remainder of the band, and the attack will come from three quarters."

"All right, sir!" And Ford Balfour instantly assembled his men, and, making a circuit of half a mile, rode to the left, while Texas Dave led the Indians belonging to the band around to the right, and all awaited the signal of the chief.

Soon it came, the clear, piercing notes of a bugle sounding a charge; and away sped the whirlwind of horsemen, yelling in defiance their battle-cries down upon the bivouac of traders.

Suddenly a line of fire flashed from the dark covert of the woods; a rattling volley of rifles followed, and many a bold rider sunk to the ground, dead, dying and crushed beneath his wounded or slain charger.

"Use your pistols, men, and when they fail, take your knives!" shouted Wild Will, in a voice heard above the clash of combat.

"Cut down all of them—dead men tell no tales," cried the outlaw chief, in tones that proved he intended his order should be obeyed.

Then waged the combat fierce and deadly, the clash of knives mingling with the rattle of firearms, and the groans of wounded, and death-shriek of agony chiming with the cry of triumph and shout of encouragement.

Minutes flew by, and still the fight continued, for the outlaws had gained the outskirts of the woods, and had, by desperate courage, driven the traders to the protection of their wagons, which had been placed in a circle, and formed a good breastwork, behind which their owners could fight, and at the same time be partially protected.

The outlaws had dismounted, upon gaining the cover of the woods, and were protecting themselves behind trees, and, in obedience to their chief's order, were ruthlessly pouring in a terrible fire upon the encamped traders, regardless of the presence of the women and children, which might fall beneath their aim, and, though his own numbers were about equal to the attacking party, and they had the advantage of position, Captain Edgerton felt that the result of the combat was decidedly doubtful, for many of his men had never been upon the plains before, and were unused to warfare of that kind.

"Set fire to one of those wagons; let us have light!" cried the stern tones of Dante, as a bold charge of a few men under Ford Balfour took possession of a part of the train.

Immediately the order was obeyed, and the bright gleams from the burning wagon lit up the scene like noonday.

"Good! Form here, men, and I'll lead you into their midst," again called out the chief, and

immediately the ringing voice of Edgerton answered him:

"Come on, you prairie thieves."

A yell from both sides commingled, and then, above the sound of combat and confusion, arose a wild, prolonged war-whoop, a battle-cry that reverberated through every arch of the grove, and was wafted far off over the prairie.

Instantly all was for the moment hushed by the fearful yell, each party amazed at its suddenness and intensity, and then, into the broad glare of the light dashed a single horseman.

It was the Masked Avenger, mounted upon his superb horse, his repeating-rifle held to his shoulder and pouring forth its deadly fire upon the outlaw band.

Each shot brought down a foe, and, so sudden and rapid had been the fire, that the outlaws had raised no arm against their bold enemy, until the rifle being uplifted was thrown aside, and, with a revolver in either hand, the daring horseman again gave his defiant war-cry, and dashed into the midst of the renegades.

Struck dumb with amazement, and their superstitious minds causing them to believe him a being not of the earth earthy, many of the outlaws gave back in confusion and dismay, and seeing this, Wild Will called to men to follow, and in one grand charge rushed upon them with yells of triumph.

In vain did Dante, Ford Balfour, and Texas Dave strive to rally their men. They were seized with a panic, and fled, pursued by the masked horseman, and leaving their chief and young lieutenant in the hands of Wild Will, who, by a daring charge, had surrounded and taken them prisoners.

In vain was the gallant resistance made by the two outlaw leaders; they were overpowered, bound, and led away, Captain Edgerton, with the greatest difficulty, saving their lives from his infuriated men.

"Mr. Gerard, please aid me in getting things to rights, for, thank God, the field is ours," said Wild Will to Osmund Gerard, who at that moment approached, a revolver in either hand.

"Assuredly I will; but it has been a hard-fought battle," answered Mr. Gerard.

"Indeed it has, and only saved to us by the unexpected arrival and fearless courage of that masked stranger. I would give my right hand to know who the man is."

"Whither has he gone?"

"Off, like an avenging angel, on the trail of the outlaws; but Gerard, now see that the prisoners and wounded are looked after, while I collect my scattered forces," and Captain Edgerton at once set about placing his camp in order again, for in the loss of both men and horses he had suffered severely.

CHAPTER V.

AFTER THE COMBAT.

WHEN Dante and Ford Balfour were taken captive, they were led away to a thick part of the grove, just bordering on the edge of the prairie, and there placed under a guard of two men.

Hearing that the outlaw leaders were both wounded, Osmund Gerard and Wild Will, after getting the camp to rights, and looking after the

dead and dying, had sought the presence of the noted chief and his lieutenant.

"You are wounded, I believe, so I have come with my friend here, who is a physician, to see if we can aid you," said Captain Edgerton, approaching Dante.

"We both received scratches; but I am myself skilled as a surgeon and have dressed our wounds—oh! God in Heaven! *you here?*"

The outlaw chief had arisen upon the approach of his visitors, and had replied to the remark of Captain Edgerton, in a stern and haughty manner; but, suddenly letting his eyes rest upon Osmund Gerard, he had staggered back, clutching at the air with his hands, and giving vent to the startling cry that so surprised his hearers.

With a bound Osmund Gerard stood before the noted chief; his eyes read in the face before him some bitter memory of the past, and he, too, would have fallen had not the strong arm of Captain Edgerton supported him.

"You are known to each other, then?" half inquired the prairie captain, as he looked first at the white, hard face of Dante, now calm and unmoved once more, after his sudden outbreak, and the frightened, grief-stricken countenance of Osmund Gerard, who stood near, trembling like a startled child.

From them the eyes of Wild Will turned upon Ford Balfour, as if for a solution of the mystery, but the young lieutenant was seated upon a log, his face buried in his hands, as if to shield it from recognition, and, still more mystified, Captain Edgerton stood in silence awaiting the *denouement* of the strange scene.

"*You here? you, Dante, the famous guerrilla chief?*

"Oh, God! this blow is mightier than I can bear!" and the eyes of Osmund Gerard again read the face of the outlaw leader, who, pale as death, was otherwise unmoved, as with folded arms and easy, graceful attitude he stood before the man whose presence had so strangely affected both of them.

"Come, Captain Edgerton, let me go away; but yet, one question let me ask this Cain-accursed man. Tell me, you whom all present know as Dante, the outlaw chief, tell me, where is—is—is thy wife?"

"That I would ask of you, old man. I know nothing of the woman."

"You lie! in your teeth you lie! She is dead, and you are her murderer."

Dante turned still more livid; his eyes burned with a brightness that was remarkable, and his fingers moved nervously; but as if determined to show no rage, he said, quietly:

"You are an old man, Osmund Gerard, and I am a prisoner, hence your insults must remain unheeded."

"Come, Mr. Gerard, let us leave them," said Wild Will, pitying the great distress of his friend, and gently drawing him away from the spot.

Osmund Gerard made no resistance, but said, earnestly:

"My friend, you can never understand what a torrent of bitter memories rush over me at sight of that man. Some time I may tell you all; but not now, not now, for I could not bear to repeat it."

"My poor wife, my poor Edith! They must never know whom yonder grave conceals. Am I excited, am I myself? for I would not my manner should betray to them the agony I feel;" and, by a powerful effort, he drove from him the outward show of sorrow that had fallen upon him, and accompanied by Wild Will, sought the spot where Mrs. Gerard and Edith Lynes had been hidden during the combat.

Both ladies welcomed the prairie captain and Mr. Gerard, and when they learned that the chief had been secured, together with his lieutenant, asked what was to be done with them?

"Death must be their portion, together with half a dozen of their band who are also prisoners; but it is time now you retired; the danger is over, and I would advise you to sleep late in the morning, as I will not resume our march for several days;" and rising, Wild Will left his friends alone. Giving a few orders to the guards, he sought the rest he so much needed, for it yet lacked two hours to daybreak; and, still wondering over the meeting between Dante and Osmund Gerard, and thinking of the mysterious man who had so strangely warned him of danger, come to his aid at such an opportune moment, and then had gone off in hot pursuit of the flying outlaws, he dropped to sleep to dream over and over again of the Masked Avenger.

In the mean time the object of his thoughts, after the stampede of the outlaws, had, as Wild Will remarked, followed upon their heels like an avenging angel.

His fleet horse overhauled steed after steed in their wild flight across the prairie, and one by one their riders fell beneath the unerring aim of the Avenger.

At length Texas Dave, finding it impossible to rally his men, turned to confront the dread foe upon his track, and met face to face the bold horseman.

The scout was a brave man, and one well skilled in the use of fire-arms, but, as he saw the daring stranger rushing upon him, and raised his pistol to fire, a certain unsteadiness of nerve destroyed his aim, the bullet missed its mark, and the next moment the sharp lance of the Avenger caught in the thick leathern belt of Texas Dave and bore him bodily from the saddle to the ground.

"Don't kill a fellow when he's down!" cried the scout, as, pinning him to the earth with his lance, the horseman drew his revolver as if to fire upon him.

"True; I should not kill a foe when wholly in my power. Are you hurt?" and the masked man drew away his keen lance.

"Bumped a little, and badly scared, besides bein' stirred up considerable in the stomach; yet no harm done to speak of," remarked the scout, rising to his feet and adjusting his clothes, while in the uncertain light he narrowly eyed the strange horse and rider before him.

"Your band met with a terrible defeat. Did your chief escape?" asked the black horseman.

"Yes, we got licked bad, that's a fact; but the boys thought you was the devil, and away they went. They had heard of you afore, you

know," answered Texas Dave, with slight humor in his tones.

"Yes, and you'll find that I'll haunt your band night and day. Wherever you go, you'll find death on your trail," replied the Avenger, in a voice trembling with some internal emotion.

"But tell me," he added, in his natural voice, "whither went your chief?"

"He didn't went, for the Prairie-men got him and the young lieutenant."

"Ha! Killed or taken prisoners, were they?"

"I see'd 'em surrounded, and so I cut loose on my own hook. I don't think they was killed."

"Then they must be looked to. Here—there is said to be honor even among thieves, so I'll risk the truth of the adage upon you. Yonder is your horse—mount and follow me. Would you be of service to your chief?"

"You bet; I'd serve him now and forevermore, amen! But what you wish to give him a good turn for, I can't see."

And so saying, Texas Dave called to his horse, tightened the saddle-girths, and rode on after the mysterious man who had taken him captive, while at the same time he was cogitating in his mind the strange circumstances that had come about, and so disastrously ended in the total defeat of the outlaw band and his own strange position.

CHAPTER VI.

A STRANGE PROCEEDING.

THE three miles that the Masked Avenger had ridden in chase of the outlaws were slowly retraced on his return to the traders' encampment, and in half an hour the hum of voices could be heard.

"Here we will halt for a while; but I wish that we should understand each other more fully," and the stranger turned to Texas Dave, who made no reply.

"In yonder grove lie your chief and his lieutenant, and well you know the morrow, now but three hours distant, will see their execution; for, if you know aught of Wild Will Edgerton, you will feel that he will show neither Dante nor Ford Balfour mercy."

"That's Gospel, stranger. Wild Will owes the chief more than one grudge for attacking his caravan, and he'll make short work of him," returned the scout.

"For that reason, I wish to save both Dante and his lieutenant. My reason for so doing is nothing to you; but if you desire to aid your officers, you must do as I bid you."

"You bet I'll go the full hog, if it's to get the chief and the lad from the clutches of the prairie-men," answered Texas Dave, with decision.

"Well, Texas Dave—"

"Hold on a bit; how is it you know me?" interrupted the scout, in surprise at finding he was known to the Masked Avenger.

"I know each and every man in your band, down to Senor Morganza, whom I slew last night, and Senor Alvez, who will yet fall under my vengeance," almost fiercely exclaimed the Masked Avenger.

"Skin me, if I don't believe you do; but what

was you going to say, when your calling my name took me aback?"

The Avenger hesitated a moment, and then quickly said:

"My intention is to enter the encampment yonder, release the chief and his lieutenant, and then come here to join you."

"In the mean time, you ride over there and secure two of the best of those horses you see feeding in the gully, and return to this spot."

"I'll do it in a jiffy. How long before you get back, stranger?"

"That depends upon circumstances. I will return as soon as possible."

The masked man then rode on in the direction of the camp, and in a short while came beneath the shadow of the woods, and at a point which he had discovered, earlier in the evening, was not very securely guarded.

Dismounting from his horse, he gave him an order in a low tone, and the faithful animal immediately dropped to the ground and lay perfectly quiet.

"Now, my brave Arab, I'll leave you for awhile," murmured the strange man; and he immediately started through the dense woods, with a slow and cautious step.

Hardly had he advanced more than half a hundred yards when he discovered a form pass between himself and the distant light of the dying fire.

"I must not slay him, and yet Dante must be saved; his time to die has not yet come. Ha! I have it, I had forgotten my New Zealand experience in the boomerang."

Returning quickly to where he had left his steed, the Masked Avenger took from the saddle several of the peculiar weapons of war, already described to the reader, and known as the boomerang.

Retracing his steps, he soon came in sight of the sentinel again, and observing the impossibility of getting nearer to him without discovery, he assumed an upright position, took the crescent-shaped weapon in his hand, and measuring with his eye the distance, hurled it suddenly through the air.

There was a whizzing sound, like a bird flying low, a thud, a half-stifled cry, and the sentinel sunk to the ground, breathless, for the boomerang had struck him fairly in the breast.

"He's not hurt, and will soon recover. Now to work!" muttered the Masked Avenger, and he soon gagged and bound the guard, and once more started forward toward the encampment.

Closely reconnoitering, he soon discovered the denser portion of the grove where the prisoners were secured, and muttering to himself, "I'll do it," he boldly walked to the spot.

The guard over the prisoners, recognizing him as the man who had so nobly come to their aid, and having heard that he had been the one to first warn the traders of the approach of the outlaws, was at a loss how to act, when suddenly stepping forward, the Masked Avenger placed one hand over his mouth, seized him in his arms, and with a power that was irresistible, bent him to the earth.

"I would not slay you, but move one inch and your life shall be the forfeit," he whispered, in a low tone, and frightened almost to death

by his strange situation, the poor guard begged for his life.

In a moment he was securely bound and gagged, and the next instant the Masked Avenger stood in the presence of Dante and Ford Balfour.

"Well, what would you?" exclaimed the chief, with a start of surprise, as he recognized the man before him as the Masked Avenger, and dreaded that he had come thither to assassinate him.

"I would release you. Come, hold up your hands and I will sever the bonds of yourself and lieutenant."

"And why? This is unexpected kindness—"

"Ask no questions; to-morrow you will die, if daylight finds you here. I have secured the guards. Come."

The chief arose to his feet, his bonds were severed, as were those also of Ford Balfour, and, quickly withdrawing from the spot, past the bound and recumbent form of the sentinel, the Masked Avenger led the way through the dense wood to where the first guard had been secured.

"You have recovered, I see. I am sorry to treat you thus, but it could not be helped; do you suffer?" and the Masked Avenger knelt beside the prostrate man and removed the gag from his mouth.

"No; I was knocked down, and—"

"Never mind; promise you will remain here without giving any alarm until you hear a whistle out upon the prairie, and I'll release you."

"Oh, yes, I'll promise, only let me go," said the trader, who was unnerved by his strange position and the presence of the remarkable man before him.

"Very well; when you hear the signal, then go to Captain Edgerton and tell him that the Masked Avenger released two of his prisoners who were condemned to die on the morrow. Mind you, remain here until you hear the signal, or it may be the worse for you," and so saying, the Masked Avenger again led the way, followed by his two companions, and soon arrived at the spot where he had left his faithful steed.

"Come, Arab," he simply said, as he passed by, and rising to his feet, the noble horse followed behind his strange master.

Out upon the prairie, carefully and cautiously leading the way, the Masked Avenger led on, until soon in the darkness forms could be indistinctly seen ahead, and a moment after the party halted beside a horseman, whom the chief recognizing, at once sprung forward and greeted with the exclamation:

"Texas Dave, as I live!"

"It's me, but no thanks to me that you are loose again; this peculiar stranger has done it all," returned the scout.

"Yes; he is certainly the most friendly enemy I ever met."

"Dante, you and your lieutenant are now free to go; the scout has secured horses for you, and will lead the way, so I advise you to be off, and at once, for I am about to give the signal of your escape."

"You are a most remarkable and incomprehensible one. Would that I knew more of you—"

"Therein you will not be disappointed, chief; but away!" and placing his hand to his lips, the Masked Avenger gave one long, shrill whistle, and, springing into his saddle, darted away across the prairie.

"Quick, chief! Hurry up, lad! Let us get away from here," cried the scout, as the Masked Avenger disappeared in the darkness, and, needing no second urging, Dante and Ford Balfour hastily mounted the horses Texas Dave had secured for them, and away the three dashed over the rolling prairie, anxious to place as many miles as possible between themselves and the traders' encampment ere day. And none too soon, for the winding notes of a bugle, coming from the camp, proved that the Prairie-men were on the alert.

CHAPTER VII.

AN ENCOUNTER.

MEAN the Masked Avenger left Dante and his companions he set off at a rapid gallop across the prairie, and did not draw rein until long after sunrise, when he came to a clump of some dozen trees, in the cool shade of which bubbled the clear waters of a tiny spring.

"Well, Arab, old fellow, here we both can rest, and sadly do we need it," said the Masked Avenger, as he threw himself from his horse and hastily took from him his saddle and accoutrements.

Feeding and watering the tired animal, the masked man then, before seeking rest for himself, gave the steed a good rubbing down, after which he set about cooking his own frugal breakfast, which consisted of jerked buffalo-meat, broiled on the coals, and a tin can of steaming coffee.

Ere he sat down to his meal, the Avenger took from his saddle-pouch an opera-glass and carefully swept the entire prairie horizon, and murmuring to himself:

"No, there can be no danger for hours," he unfastened the clasps that held the steel mask upon his face, and threw it, with his broad sombrero, to the ground.

It was a strange, dark face that was revealed—for each feature was perfect in its molding, the complexion browned by exposure, the hair black, as was also the mustache and goatee, both worn long, and giving a decided expression to the handsome, and peculiarly striking countenance.

In the eyes rested a look that was hard to fathom, an expression as though bygone bitter memories haunted them with phantom images, a wild fire brightening and darkening them each instant, and almost tinging the long, sweeping, womanly lashes with light.

It was a face to love, a face to fear! possessing great beauty, but marred by its capability to be transformed into a devil's, should the passion of the man be aroused! and yet, hovering around the shapely, decided mouth, was a look of mingled bitterness and sadness, as though a struggle was going on between a prayer and a curse for the mastery.

An instant he stood like a statue, gazing far off over the prairie, and then, stifling back a sigh that arose to his lips, a cruel light flashed over his face, and a gloom overspread it, which caused him to look, for the moment, as though

forty instead of thirty years had been his existence.

After a hearty meal the Avenger threw himself upon his *serape*, and in a moment was in a deep sleep, from which he did not awake until, hours after, his horse gave a low neigh.

In an instant his master was upon his feet, and glancing out over the prairie, now tinged with a golden light from the setting sun, he discovered a small train about a mile distant, coming directly toward the grove.

"Hal my brave Arab, you have prevented me from being caught napping," said the Avenger, and hastily resuming his mask and sombrero, he set about saddling his steed.

In less than five minutes he was in his saddle, and once more turned his gaze upon the approaching train, which consisted of half a dozen large wagons, a traveling carriage, and a dozen mounted persons.

Arriving within a few hundred yards of the chaparral, two men rode forward on horseback, as if to reconnoiter, ere they approached too near to the wood, and in one of them the Masked Avenger recognized Senor Alvez, the Mexican ranchero, whom the reader will remember as being with Dante, with his companion Senor Morganza, who had fallen beneath the bullet of the Avenger. The second horseman was an Indian chief, El Rio, who commanded the warriors belonging to the outlaw band.

"Aha! my worthies, you are bent on mischief!" muttered the masked man, and, shaking his bridle-rein, he darted like a hawk from the covert of the wood.

True to his Indian nature, El Rio gave the war-whoop of his tribe when he caught sight of his enemy, and called to Senor Alvez to follow as he spurred forward to meet his foe; but, seeing that the Mexican had sought safety in flight back to the train, the Indian dreaded to alone meet the horseman rushing upon him, so, wheeling his horse, he also took to his heels.

The Avenger pressed on rapidly and each moment brought him nearer and nearer to the wagon-train, behind whose shelter the fugitives sought safety.

In the mean time, the train had come to a halt and rapidly placed itself upon the defensive; but, observing that but one man had come from the chaparral, the leader called to his men not to fire, and the next instant the Avenger dashed into their midst, his long lance in rest, and his reins well in hand.

Rapidly El Rio and the Mexican discharged their rifles at their bold pursuer, but unhurt he came on, and the next moment his glittering lance would have pierced the heart of Senor Alvez, when a loud cry, in a woman's voice, caused the Avenger to raise his weapon.

"You will not kill him! You will spare him!" cried a full, rich voice, and, turning quickly, the Masked Avenger beheld by his side a maiden of eighteen, dressed in a dark gray riding-habit and hat, and mounted upon a thoroughbred steed.

A glance was sufficient to show him that she was graceful in form and beautiful, and her imploring look turned upon him for mercy for the Indian and Mexican, caused him to bow low and say, quietly:

"Lady, I spare their lives at your request, though two men less deserving of mercy never lived."

"Say you so, sir? I, myself did not like their villainous faces, but, being without guides, we were compelled to take them," and thus speaking a gentleman of about fifty years of age, well-armed and mounted, rode toward the masked man.

"Your guides, sir? Why, only last night they were with their outlaw band in the attack upon the wagon-train of the Prairie-men, and with your permission I will dismiss them, as this lady dislikes to be a witness to scenes of bloodshed."

"My daughter did but carry out her woman's nature, sir, in begging for their lives. We are fresh from civilization, and yet unused to the wild scenes enacted upon the frontier," returned the elderly gentleman, and when he had ceased speaking, the Avenger turned again to the Indian and Mexican, who had sat upon their horses, quiet but interested listeners to the conversation regarding them.

"El Rio, and you, Senor Alvez, have both escaped death to-day through the intercession of this lady; but your days are numbered, and I warn you of it.

"Now begone! and remember that Death is on your trail. Away with you!"

As he spoke the Avenger pointed across the prairie with his lance, and needing no second urging, they wheeled their horses and darted away at their topmost speed.

Every member of the train had now gathered around the stranger who had so mysteriously come into their midst, and with curiosity and admiration they were gazing upon him.

At length, a moment after the departure of the Mexican and his ally, the same gentleman who had before spoken said, pleasantly:

"We are certainly indebted to you for your interference in our behalf; but, pardon me if I ask to whom are we indebted for the service rendered?"

"I am known as the Masked Avenger. These men flying away yonder belong to a band of outlaws headed by the renowned chief, Dante.

"Against that band I have a hatred that death alone satiates, and upon their trail I will ever be found."

The almost fierce manner of the stranger, his tones of inward emotion, and the flash of his dark eyes impressed his hearers in a remarkable manner, for they felt that before them was a man who had suffered some great wrong, and was in revenge bringing retaliation upon his foes.

His strange appearance, armament, and mask, all impressed them, and caused them to desire to know more of the man, to see beneath the steel covering that hid the face from view.

As if remembering that it devolved upon him to speak, the Masked Avenger, after a pause, continued:

"I judge you are a party, sir, seeking homes in our Western land."

"We are, sir. I am accompanied by my daughter and servants, and having a son who has passed a number of years in the wild life of the frontier, I was anxious to discover him, ere we settled down,"

"Perhaps I can aid you in—"

"I do not doubt it; those devils, whom you so suddenly dismissed, said my son was the commander of a party of Prairie-men. His name is William Edgerton."

"Ha! indeed! I have met him, and only a few hours since; it was his encampment the outlaws attacked last night."

"Great God! tell me, was he hurt?"

"He was not. The traders suffered severely, and are now encamped some twenty miles distant, and there they will remain a few days to recuperate."

"Then we had best seek them there."

"Not to-night. Your teams, I observe, need rest, so you can encamp in yonder chaparral, and in the morning I will guide you to the encampment; but, tell me, where did you fall in with El Rio and the Mexican?"

"We saw them first this morning, at our last night's encampment. They offered to guide us to the river-banks, near here, where I had decided to prospect for lands for a settlement."

"They were leading you into a trap; but come."

The Masked Avenger then led the way to the little grove, and soon tents were pitched, and all was preparation for the evening meal, for the negro servants, some twenty in number, were not long in making all snug and comfortable for the night.

Declining the invitation of Colonel Edgerton to join them at supper, the Masked Avenger mounted his horse and rode away, promising that he would return as soon as he had taken a gallop a few miles out upon the prairie.

Kate Edgerton was a girl of more than ordinary beauty, and though fresh from boarding-school, was accomplished and most womanly in disposition and character.

She had returned to her home, an old farmhouse in New Hampshire, to find that her father had taken the "emigration fever," and was determined to seek a new home in the far Southwest.

Being a girl of an adventurous spirit, and having no strong ties to bind her to her old New Hampshire home, other than her mother's grave down by the meadow brook, Kate had readily acquiesced in her father's views, and the result was that, striking out for the Kansas border, they there fully equipped themselves with good servants and plenty of stores, and set forth upon their westward march.

A secret feeling, a hope, animated the hearts of both father and daughter, and that was, that in those western wilds they might hear of the long-absent son and brother.

Colonel Edgerton had dearly loved his noble boy, and Kate, as a girl of ten, remembered her big brother with pride and pleasure.

The thought, then, that a few more hours would bring them face to face with the Prodigal, was a joy to both of them, and together, around the blazing camp-fire, father and daughter talked over the joyful meeting and longed for the morrow.

The strange man, with his face hidden from human gaze, who had so opportunely come into their midst, was fully discussed, and the flash of his dark eyes yet burned in the maiden's remem-

brance, and with warm words she defended him when her father called him cruel.

"Did he not spare those men, father, when I asked it?"

"Yes, Kate; and doubtless, as you say, he had cause to visit vengeance on them."

"I will not judge him harshly until I know more of him. But come; the guards are set and the camp is quiet; so seek some rest. I will await the coming back of our masked friend, for he promised to be absent but an hour."

In a few moments the encampment was a scene of perfect quietude and repose.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE CAPTURE AND PURSUIT.

MIDNIGHT was drawing near when, waking from a light doze, Colonel Edgerton arose to seek his tent, wondering at the non-appearance of the Avenger.

He had made but a few steps when his heart almost stood still with horror, as a wild, piercing shriek echoed through the grove, and he recognized his daughter's voice.

At the same moment he heard a low order given in a quick, stern tone, then the sound of retreating hoofs, and away sped three horses over the prairie, and in the uncertain light the stricken father recognized that his daughter was being borne away, a captive!

The camp was now thoroughly aroused, and following the colonel to Kate's tent, one and all discovered she was no longer there, and in a frightened manner her poor maid endeavored to explain the disappearance of her mistress.

"My God—my God! what will become of my poor, poor Kate?" exclaimed Colonel Edgerton.

After a moment he turned suddenly toward the weeping colored girl, who acted as Kate's maid, and said, quickly:

"Tell me, Topsy, how did it occur? Be quick, girl, for the horses will soon be ready for me to start in pursuit."

Topsy dried her eyes and said:

"You see, sir, we—Miss Kate and me—was sitting up late, talking about the masked gentleman, and she only lay down with her riding-dress on, 'cause, you see, she expected him to come back—"

"Who? Expected who back?" asked the anxious father?

"The masked gentleman, sir; so we both went to sleep unbeknown like, and the next thing I knew the big Injun who came into camp this morning had hold of me, and the white man had Missy Katie, and he picked her up and put her on a horse—"

"It was Missy Kate's own horse they took, sir," said a negro man, approaching.

Topsy continued:

"And that's all I knows about it. Poor Missy Katie!"

"Well, Tom, what is best to be done?" asked Colonel Edgerton of the negro man who acted in the capacity of manager of the train.

"I think three or four of us better go after the devils, sir," answered the man.

"Are the horses ready?"

"Yes, sir; all ready."

"Then four of you boys come with me, and mind you arm yourselves well. Tom, I leave

the train in your charge, and if the Masked Avenger comes, tell him what has happened, and which way we went," and Colonel Edgerton entered his tent to arm and equip himself thoroughly for the dangerous undertaking before him.

Mounting their horses, the party dashed away from the chaparral across the prairie but a quarter of an hour after the flight of the villains who had stolen poor Katie, and warm were the wishes of God-speed from the servants of the train, left under the charge of the faithful Tom.

At a rapid gallop the horsemen dashed on for a mile or more, and then, afar off, the quick eye of one of the negroes descried a dark object moving upon the prairie.

"Come on, boys! It must be the scoundrels!" cried the anxious father, and away they flew, all eyes kept steadily fixed on the moving object.

"It is only one man, sir, and he's coming this way," again said the negro, and halting, a closer glance was bestowed on the approaching object, which it was now evident was a horse and rider.

"It is the Masked Avenger, colonel," remarked another negro, and as he spoke, the horseman started toward the group at a rapid gait.

"Hold, sir; we are friends!" cried Colonel Edgerton, as he observed the approach of the stranger appeared hostile.

"Ha! Colonel Edgerton, it is you? How is it I find you thus far from your camp? By Heaven, a moment more and I'd have sent a shot into your midst, for I mistook you for some of the scattered outlaw band," and the Masked Avenger wheeled his horse alongside the steed bestrode by the colonel.

"Thank God I have found you, my masked friend, for my daughter has been stolen—"

"Stolen! Your daughter! Tell me how and when?" and his voice, deep in his sternness, startled all present.

Those devils, whom you this morning spared on Kate's account, came, half an hour ago, to the camp, and bore her from her tent ere we could offer the slightest resistance."

The Masked Avenger mused a moment in silence, and all waited anxiously for him to speak, for upon his words hung hope or despair.

At length he said:

"Colonel Edgerton, leave the matter to me, and I will return your daughter safely to you."

"Unaided! Oh, no; you must not go alone; I will—"

"Colonel, my days and nights are passed alone. You can be no aid to me, but on the contrary, a drawback.

"Come, I will accompany you back to camp, and there, after I've given Arab a feed and short rest, I will strike their trail and follow it to the bitter end."

Strangely impressed by the words and manner of the Masked Avenger, Colonel Edgerton made no reply, and soon after the party returned to the chaparral.

"Here, boys, two of you give Arab a good rubbing, and let him have food, while I search for the trail of those devils," called out the Avenger, as he dismounted.

The trail was sought for and found, and then Colonel Edgerton and his mysterious friend re-

turned to the tent and entered into a long conversation together, in which it was decided that the train was to take up the line of march for the encampment of the traders, at an early hour in the morning, and the Avenger gave the colonel directions how to find the grove where his son was then bivouacked.

"As soon as it is light you must start, seek your son, and ask him to delay three days for me at his present encampment, and then, if I do not come by that time, to continue on, making easy marches, and, Heaven willing, I will overtake the caravan ere long, bringing with me Miss Edgerton."

"God grant you may be successful, sir. I do not know you; I know nothing of the face hidden by that mask, or of the circumstance that causes you thus to shut out from your fellowmen the noble countenance I feel that you possess; yet I trust you fully. I pity you for the misfortunes I feel have fallen heavily upon you, and you have an old man's blessing, given from his inmost heart," and Colonel Edgerton grasped the gauntlet-gloved hand of the man before him.

"I thank you, Colonel Edgerton, for your trust in me; it shall not be misplaced. Ere long I hope to place your daughter in your arms.

"Now I must be off, for Arab has had rest, and is ready and willing to test his speed with anything that travels the prairie. *Adios.*"

With a bound the Masked Avenger was in his saddle, a cheerful cry to his horse, a wave of his hand, and like a bird from the cage flew the fleet steed, an animal that had proudly trod the burning sands of the Arabian desert, and whose blooded lineage went back for centuries, for Arab was born in a Bedouin's tent and had passed his colthood in a far foreign land.

A heartfelt prayer followed after the flying horseman—a prayer wrung from the heart of an agonized parent, who paced the weary hours of night away, and as the first glimmer of dawn gilded the eastern horizon, he aroused the camp and set forth upon the march.

It was a long and weary day of travel to the anxious father, but at last the distant grove came in sight, and through the green foliage shone the white covers of the wagons and tents.

Unable to keep pace with the slow-moving vehicles, Colonel Edgerton put spurs to his horse and dashed on until the grove was reached.

"Can you tell me where I can find Captain Edgerton?" he asked of a dashing-looking Prairie-man he encountered.

"Wild Will is yonder in his tent—in the large one there to the right. I hope no ill news," politely returned the person addressed; but, unheeding the latter remark, Colonel Edgerton rode on and dismounted at the tent, his heart throbbing with painful emotion, for nine long years had passed since he had last seen his son, and in that time changes had come to all.

CHAPTER IX.

HOPE DEFERRED.

WITH a strange feeling creeping over him, Colonel Edgerton stood without the tent, and gazed within upon the manly form of his son, for he recognized in the tall, powerful, though

graceful figure, the bronzed though bearded face, the change that nine long years had made in his boy.

Seated at a rude camp-table, his hand supporting his head and lost in deep meditation, was Wild Will, seemingly unconscious of the bustle of the camp around him and the soft beauties of the dying day.

The Prairie-man was "building castles in the air;" he was anticipating once again visiting the old familiar scene; but not alone, for with him would be his wife, a fair young flower he had plucked from the Southwestern prairies; a flower as beautiful and pure as nature itself, for Edith Lynes was all that was beautiful, and her innocent, childish nature had entirely won the heart of the bold frontiersman, and he was determined to gain a reciprocity of that affection.

Thus his was a happy dream—it was of a commingling of the past and the future, and he did not start when he heard his name called softly in the sonorous voice of his father; he did not start, nor turn, for he believed that imagination and memory had but made the tones appear more natural.

"William, my son, my son!"

"No, it cannot be unreal; it is a reality,"—and, with a bound, Wild Will was upon his feet; his eyes fell upon the old familiar face, the hair turned to silver gray, the furrows of care plowed deeper, but still the same well-remembered face, and with a glad cry, "My father! you here?" the brave man sprung forward and greeted his old parent with an affection not blunted by years, absence and manhood.

It was a happy meeting, there in that prairie tent, between father and son, a meeting of joy tinged with sorrow, for with bowed head and throbbing heart Wild Will heard of the death of his mother—she whom he had loved so dearly and yet neglected by years of wanderings away from the old roof-tree.

At length, when he learned of the capture of his sister, he sprung to his feet with a cry of rage, resembling more the angry growl of some wounded, infuriated animal, than the tones of the human voice.

"By the Eternal! they shall pay for this, and dearly, too! I swear it! I swear it!"

"Be calm, my son, and listen to me. Kate was stolen by two of the outlaw band, who, it seems, joined in the attack on your camp; two men whose lives she had saved in the morning, for in reconnoitering for a camping-ground, they were pursued into the very shelter of our wagons by a most remarkable character, who would have run them through with his lance—"

"Ha! 'twas the Masked Avenger—"

"It was. Kate begged for mercy for the Indian and the Mexican, and the Avenger kindly spared them, but drove them instantly away, and revealed to us their true characters."

"Who was the Indian?" asked Wild Will.

"He was called El Rio—"

"Curse him! He is a most bloodthirsty wretch and the chief of a large tribe of warriors."

"Well, they left the train in a hurry, and then the Masked Avenger took us to the grove to camp, and went forth upon a scouting gallop on the prairie, and it was while he was absent that El Rio and the Mexican returned to our encamp-

ment and seized and bore Kate off ere resistance could be offered."

"Have you seen the Avenger since?"

"Yes, my son; I met him on the prairie; for with four of the boys I pursued the scoundrels, and he returned to the camp with us, took the trail, and set forth alone upon the path."

"Then their doom is sealed, and I have real hopes of seeing my poor little sister yet alive," said Wild Will, and then he continued:

"Did the Avenger say where he was to join you?"

"Yes; he bade me tell you to delay for him at this place, for three days, and if he did not put in an appearance by that time, to move on slowly upon your intended journey and he would overtake you. Now, what is best to be done?"

"I will do as he says. Although he is a most remarkable man, and his every action one of mystery, I trust him thoroughly."

"A few days since he came to my train and warned me of the attack of the outlaws; then the evening of that day I sallied forth alone upon the prairie, and he met me, and through the speed of his marvelous horse, saved my life."

"At the most opportune moment of the combat, and when I believed the fight lost to us, the Avenger, single-handed, came upon us most mysteriously, and it was his wonderful horsemanship, deadly aim, and weird-like appearance that put the outlaws to flight."

"Again I hear of him in my camp, binding and gagging my sentinels, and releasing Dante, the outlaw chief, and his lieutenant, whom we had taken captive, and had most securely bound and guarded."

"Next he comes up as your friend, and now is in pursuit of the renegades who captured Kate."

"I trust him, I believe in him; and until I hear from him I do not see that I can make any move to retake my poor sister."

Thus it was decided between father and son, and the train of Colonel Edgerton having arrived the wagons were assigned a good camping-place and the grove became quite lively over the additional numbers added to the caravan.

Colonel Edgerton soon became most popular with the Prairie-men, and one and all felt for his misfortunes, and those of their young comrade and commander, Wild Will.

Especially was the coming of Colonel Edgerton most welcome to the Gerards, and in her thought of the misfortunes of poor Kate, Mrs. Gerard almost forgot her own sufferings, and, with Edith, looked forward with hope and pleasure to the early coming of the captive maiden, for all appeared to feel most perfect confidence in the promise of the Masked Avenger, and to believe him capable of keeping that promise.

Thus the three days passed away, and with anxious heart and still hoping, Wild Will determined to await yet another day for the coming of the Masked Avenger.

Yet another day came, and with the rising of the sun the order was given to make ready for the march, for Wild Will felt that he could not detain the caravan any longer.

With sad hearts and backward glances the train at length moved slowly away, and many a man and woman felt a sorrowful memory clinging around that isolated grove, there in the roll-

ing prairie, for a number of heaped up mounds of new earth marked the last resting-place of those that were dear to them, for the outlaws had left their bloody trail behind them.

CHAPTER X.

DANTE'S STRONGHOLD.

WHEN Dante found himself free upon the prairie, by the strange act of the Masked Avenger, and with Ford Balfour and Texas Dave as companions, he was not long in taking the advice given him to get away from so dangerous a vicinity. Putting spurs to his horse, and followed by the scout and lieutenant, he dashed off at a rapid pace.

Miles were gone over ere they three drew rein, and daylight showing them that they were not pursued, Dante called a halt for a consultation.

"Comrades," he began, as soon as they had dismounted and were resting their tired horses: "Comrades, I found in yonder camp one whom I would rather face the devil than have met—one who, I tell you, *must die*."

"To-night we were defeated, and through the cowardly superstition of our men, who fled from that masked demon, who, I also swear, *must die*."

"True, to-night he served us a good turn—"

"Yes, and rip me up, if I'll be the one to cause him to pass in his checks," interrupted Texas Dave, decidedly.

"Nor would I cause him harm," said Ford Balfour, quietly.

"Nonsense; you will both do as I wish you. The fellow has brought death into our midst, and to-night has ruined all my plans, for had it not been for him I would have captured the wagon-train, and now have been in possession of all, instead of flying for my life across the prairies."

"He shall not live if I can bring him to his death."

"But now, we must discuss other things, for our band is scattered far and wide, and they must be assembled at the stronghold within three days."

"Are you going to the stronghold now?" asked Ford Balfour.

"I am; I will take the river-road, and collect my men. You, Balfour, keep the prairie, and gather up the scouts and outposts, while Texas Dave will strike into the forests on a like duty."

"In two days I will expect you at the stronghold, and if either of you meet El Rio and Alvez, tell the latter to bring in the rancheros and the former to collect every devilish red-skin that he can depend on for cruelty."

"This will swell the band to two hundred, and, by Heaven, I'll follow on the trail of those Prairie-men and woe betide them when my vengeance falls."

Dante's face was livid, he had wrought himself up to a perfect frenzy, and rapidly he paced to and fro upon the greensward, trampling unmercifully upon the tiny prairie flowers at his feet.

"You understand my orders now; so let us part."

"Remember, be at the stronghold within three days at furthest, and if you meet the Masked

Avenger slay him as you would a dog, and I'll give you a fortune for his scalp."

So saying the chief threw himself into his saddle, drove the spurs deep into the sides of his horse and dashed away over the rolling prairies, leaving Ford Balfour and Texas Dave together.

"Well; he's as mad as a hornet, that's a fact; but I'm blamed if I'm going to go for the scalp of the Masked Avenger! and for two reasons, which is plain: I think he's more likely to raise my hair, than I is his'n, and then I'll not injure a man who has befriended me, even if 'tis to serve the chief."

"You are right, Dave; the Masked Avenger is certainly a bitter enemy to our band, and frustrated our attack upon the caravan; but to-night he spared the lives of the chief and ourselves, and I do not intend to raise hand against him unless 'tis in self-defense," and Ford Balfour spoke warmly.

"Well, yonder goes the chief, riding like mad for the river, and I s'pose we might as well git, so here goes," and Texas Dave mounted his horse, and the lieutenant being in readiness to move on, the two parted—the one to continue on in the prairie; the other to seek the dense forests bordering the green plains.

Three days after, the chief greeted his two companions from whom he had parted upon the prairies, in the stronghold of the band, which was situated upon the green and sloping banks of a Southwestern river.

There Dante had established his camp several years before, and from it the united efforts of the frontiersmen and rancheros, aided by the military, had been unable to force him.

Returning to the stronghold, having collected while *en route* a number of stragglers, Dante was delighted to note that his men were anxious to wipe out the stain upon their characters, and he fanned the flame of their passions, until, when Ford Balfour and Texas Dave arrived, bringing with them other members of the band, they found the whole camp in a white heat of rage and ready for any enormity.

Bitter indeed were the denunciations of the Masked Avenger, and terrible were the threats against him.

In the midst of the excitement, while Dante and his officers were arming and mounting their men for the long and dangerous undertaking before them, of following on, in a day or two, the caravan of traders, there was a sudden stir in one end of the camp, and a small mounted party were seen rapidly approaching the cabin, where dwelt the chief and his lieutenant.

The next moment the party halted by the door, and a shout of joy, a whoop of delight, went up from the assembled crowd, as Senor Alvez and El Rio were recognized, bearing with them their captive, Kato Edgerton.

"Senor, I welcome you; old red-skin, you have redeemed yourself. Come in and let me hear your story," exclaimed Dante, pleasantly, and then, turning toward the maiden, who still remained seated in her saddle, her face pale and dejected, her hair down, but yet beautiful in her fatigue and misery, he said, with courtly grace:

"Lady, permit me to dismount you, and I

trust no rudeness has been visited upon you by your captors."

"To tear me from the protection of my father, and bring me to a den of thieves I should think was sufficient rudeness, Sir Chief," answered Kate, with spirit, as declining the offered aid she sprung to the ground.

Dante bit his lip in anger at her words, but concealing his emotion, he said:

"You are doubtless fatigued with your long ride; enter the cabin, lady, and my house-keeper will show you to a room, where you can refresh yourself. Here, Jane, see that this lady has every comfort and hospitality my humble home can give," and the chief called to an old woman whom curiosity had that moment brought to the door.

"I'll treat her well, you may be certain; but what is a gold cage to the bird that's in it? Freedom and home would be more to her for one moment, humble though it was, than years of gilded misery," answered the old woman, advancing toward Kate, with kindness in her manner.

"Peace, woman; I've told you I'd pluck that tongue of yours from out thy withered throat if you gave it much freedom. Beware, or I'll carry my threat into execution."

The chief spoke in a voice of terrible earnestness, and, as if dreading him, the old woman said, gently:

"Come, girl, I'll do all I can to make your stay here one at least of comfort."

Kate had shrunk from the cruel words of Dante, and following the old woman eagerly, soon found herself in a neat, but rude, apartment, which she was told would be her prison.

"Here, then, I am to live in doubt of the future. Oh, my poor, poor father!" exclaimed the unhappy maiden.

"These devils will be up to any crime, poor girl; but, how did you get into their clutches?" asked old Jane.

"I was with my father, emigrating to the far Southwest, for we were going to settle there, when, one night at our camp, I was seized and borne away by the Indian and Mexican.

"They hurried me along, and I had no rest except an hour or so at night. Tell me, was that Dante, the outlaw chief, who spoke to me?"

"It was."

"Who was the handsome young man, with such a sad face, who stood near him?" asked Kate, with interest.

"That was his lieutenant, Ford Balfour. Poor boy! he is out of place amid these devils."

"And why are you here—you, who seem to have known a life so different?" suddenly asked Kate, fixing her bright eyes firmly upon the haggard, prematurely-old face of the woman before her.

A slight tinge of color came into the faded cheeks; the head dropped for a moment, but then came the reply:

"I am here because God gave me passions that brought my ruin. Years ago, when you were but a child, girl, I loved a man not wisely but too well. I loved him and believed him all that was true and noble. He was an incarnate demon, for he ruined my life, my hope."

"Buffeted about—for he deserted me after I forsook home, parents, all for him—I drifted from worse to worse, until I at length became the wife of an outlaw, to, in the end, as years came over me and beauty faded, sink to the condition of a menial in the house of the chief of this band, for now I am the housekeeper of the outlaw, Dante."

The wild look of the woman, the flashes of grief and despair that swept over her face, brought tears to the beautiful eyes of Kate Edgerton, and with pity she held out her hands toward the forlorn creature, and was about to breathe some word of sympathy and kindness, when a wild cry outside the cabin startled her, and rushing to the window, with poor old Jane, she saw a scene that brought a chill of terror over her frame, for her eyes were yet unused to deeds of blood, and with a cry of fear she sunk half-sainting upon the floor.

CHAPTER XI.

THE AVENGER AT WORK.

STARTING out on his mission of rescue, the Masked Avenger headed at once for the outlaws' general headquarters—well knowing that the Mexican and Indian would proceed thither.

As if thoroughly acquainted with every path of the prairie and forest, the Masked Avenger rode on, with apparently little caution, until the afternoon of the third day, when he proceeded slowly, and with a piercing look always directed ahead of him.

Turning to the right, he soon came to the river-bank, and without hesitation rode directly into the water and swam his horse across to the other side.

Turning down-stream when he reached the opposite bank, he rode for the distance of a mile, and then came to where a range of high hills broke off abruptly as they struck the river, and up the steep sides he ascended until he reached the summit.

"Now, Arab, old fellow, ere long we'll know what is before us," he muttered, as usual addressing his horse for want of other companion.

Dismounting, he led the animal into a sheltered and secure retreat, rich with luxuriant grass and watered by a small rivulet; and after relieving him of his trappings, he set about preparing his own meal.

"Here, old fellow, is food and water for you, and I'll leave you to rest and refresh yourself while I have a look around me," continued the Avenger, and the intelligent steed answered with a low neigh.

Carefully looking over his arms, the Avenger started forth on a tramp, directing his steps along the top of the range of hills and in the direction of the river.

A walk of a few minutes brought him to the edge of the cliff, closely sheltered with a dense growth of trees, and from his lofty lookout a wide expanse of country came under his vision.

First his eye fell on the far-away plains and rolling hills; then, drawing nearer, rested upon a scene that brought a bitter and triumphant smile to his lip, for he had temporarily removed the steel mask to cool his face with the balmy air wafted along the river's course.

Below him, upon the other bank of the river,

and distant some five hundred yards, was the outlaw camp, or stronghold, spread out before his earnest gaze.

"Hail what is the excitement now?" he suddenly cried, starting up from his reclining position, as he observed a commotion in camp; and, as he looked, he despaired the party approaching the chief's cabin, which the reader already knows was composed of the unfortunate Kate and her captors.

"Just in time; I believed they had arrived ahead of me. Now I can act, and why not at once?" he muttered, as he saw the maiden dismunt and enter the house.

"No time like the present. Now, Senor Alvez, your doom is sealed;" and so saying, the Avenger slowly arose to his feet and held his rifle at a ready.

Upon the edge of the small and rude veranda Dante and Ford Balfour were standing, listening to the account of the capture of Kate from the lips of the Mexican, for the Indian had already joined his warriors in their wigwams, further down the river.

Suddenly a distant report was heard, a whizzing sound cut the air, and, with a loud shriek of terror, Senor Alvez sunk to the earth, clutching wildly at his side, whence welled a dark stream of blood.

Dante wheeled and glanced around him with eagle eye, Ford Balfour scanned every tree and cabin within range, and hurrying forms rushed to the scene; but no clew could be found as to the whereabouts of the marksman who had aimed the fatal bullet.

"Curses! am I to lose my men in this mysterious way?"

"Whence came the shot?" cried the infuriated chief; but no answer came to his words.

At this moment was it that Kate Edgerton rushed to the window, and the scene that met her vision caused her to fall back in a swoon.

But old Jane quickly applied restoratives, and again the maiden gazed out upon the wild excitement going on beneath her window.

The chief was bitterly cursing, and ordering men to at once set forth in search of the man who had slain Senor Alvez; but, even as he spoke, there came another whistle of a bullet—a whirring, whirling sound, dreaded by all who know its deadly sting, and from the midst of the crowd who had now gathered around, it singled out the tall form of El Rio, the Indian chief.

"Oh, God! is this thy just retribution?" murmured Kate, as she saw the Indian totter, sway to and fro, wave his arms wildly in the air, and with the war-whoop of his tribe echoing through his pallid lips, fall to the earth, with the life-blood pouring from a wound in his left breast.

"Those who sinned against you have both met their doom, lady," said a whisper in Kate's ears, and turning, the maiden saw by the pale face of old Jane, and its scared look, that she too was impressed by the mysterious circumstance.

"Curses and furies! who did this deed? From whence came that shot?" yelled Dante, almost beside himself with rage; and then he cried, after a moment's pause:

"Hail by Heaven! After him, men! 'Tis the Masked Avenger!"

But no man moved; a dread appeared to have fallen upon all, a fear of the supernatural character of their terrible foe, and for once the command of their greatly-feared chief remained unheeded.

"Behold!" suddenly cried Ford Balfour, who had been earnestly searching every position in and around the stronghold likely to give security to a hidden foe; and as he spoke, he pointed to the distant cliff upon the other side of the river, and while the word was yet upon his lips there came a white puff of smoke from the green foliage, another ominous whirr, and another of the band, a renegade negro, sunk to his death.

A fearful yell of mingled terror, rage and hatred went up from the crowd, and loud and angry were the chief's orders ere he could still the torrent of frenzy.

A half-hour passed, calm was restored, and unmoved once more, thoroughly himself, Dante said, in the cool, distinct tones he assumed when feeling deeply:

"It is as I expected, the Masked Avenger. Men, prepare for the march, for we are to leave this night for the trail of the traders."

"Texas Dave, to you I give the duty of hunting down that arch-fiend; so take with you half a dozen men, and when you have secured either the man or his scalp, come rapidly on after us, for I shall need you. Hail!"

As the chief spoke, again came the white puff, the distant report, and the ominous whistle of the bullet into their midst, and one more victim fell beneath the deadly aim, while suddenly, upon the very brink of the lofty cliff, the form of a horseman was seen to spur forward, and reining his charger back upon his haunches, quietly gaze down upon the scene of commotion he had caused.

Every eye was turned upon him with dread, hate, and admiration, and so struck were all by his audacity and superb appearance, his defiance of their entire band, and cool confidence in himself, that for a moment no word was spoken, all gazing in silence.

Thus a moment passed, and with a wave of his long lance, the Masked Avenger wheeled his charger and dashed away.

"After him, Texas Dave, and bring him in, dead or alive," cried the chief.

Turning to re-enter his cabin, he caught sight of Kate Edgerton standing in the window, and he said, harshly:

"You are enjoying the deadly work of the Masked Avenger, doubtless, lady?"

"I must confess I could not but admire the fearless courage of the man, whoever he may be, in thus defying a band of outlaws in their very stronghold," answered the maiden, haughtily, and with slight triumph in her tones.

"And his noble appearance, also, I suppose?" sneered the chief.

"Yes; both horse and rider are superb creatures."

"A truce to this. Ere yonder dead carcass lost his life, the now stiff tongue informed me that you were the sister of Captain Edgerton, known among Prairie-men as Wild Will."

"I am the sister of Captain Edgerton."

"Then in you I have a prize, and Alvez lied not. Come, my lady, you must rest and refresh

yourself, for this night you must accompany me."

"Whither?"

"I am anxious to overtake the caravan commanded by your brother. If he yields to my demands, which are to give into my hands certain persons in his train, and riches belonging to himself, I will in return deliver you safely into his hands; but if he refuses, then I shall attack and carry the train, take the riches, rescue my prisoners, and have you in the bargain."

Kate Edgerton was as brave as woman could be, but she quailed at the possible fate before her, and feeling her utter helplessness, replied:

"I am in your power, and I beg for mercy."

"Prepare yourself for the march. Until I meet your brother, every attention shall be shown you."

So saying, Dante walked away, to speak to Texas Dave, who, at the head of a party of scouts, was leaving the camp to pursue the Masked Avenger, who, I will explain to the reader, had, after firing his first fatal shots, gone back for his steed, and returned once more to the cliff, to again make the outlaws feel his power, and from thence he coolly, though bidden himself, watched the commotion he had created, and saw the departure of the party sent after him, and discovered their direction to be toward a ford where they could the more readily cross the river.

"Well, Arab, I'll have to depend on you, old fellow," said the Avenger, and, taking from a saddle-pouch four peculiarly-shaped pads, with india-rubber fastenings, he drew one upon each of Arab's hoofs, and mounting, once more set forth on his way adown the opposite side of the hill from which he had come.

"Now, if they find your trail, old fellow, smart as they are, they'll do more than I give them credit for," he said, with a light laugh; and carefully guiding the noble animal, who seemed really to feel and know that his master was in trouble, the Avenger continued on for the distance of a mile or more, until he reached the base of the hill, at a point where the river was easily fordable.

Without halting, he rode into the swift current, and, just as darkness came on, found himself safely hidden in a thicket but a few hundred yards from the outlaw stronghold, and from whence he could gain a view of any important move about to take place.

CHAPTER XII.

DEATH ON THE TRAIL.

AFTER discovering the advantage of his position as a lookout and place of concealment by night, the Masked Avenger devoted himself, as was always his habit, to the comfort of his horse ere he looked out for his own welfare.

Hardly had he, however, at length thrown himself down for a short sleep, when he was made aware that some extra commotion was going on in the outlaw camp.

Rising to his feet, he carefully reconnoitered the position, and now was convinced that a movement in force was intended.

"Yes, I see all now. Dante is not going to submit quietly to his defeat, but has collected

his extra force to go on after the caravan. Well, I'll have so much less to risk in the rescue of Miss Edgerton, for the camp will be left comparatively unguarded. Ha! they are already on the march," and so saying to himself, the Avenger retraced his steps to where he had left his horse, and soon equipped him, so that he might be ready for a move at an instant's warning. A few more moments, and the outlaws were on the march, filing in a long column from the encampment and disappearing in the shadow of the forest. The road lay within a few yards of where the Avenger was hidden, and his piercing eyes narrowly watched the advancing line until it came abreast of his position, and with a start he suddenly ascertained that Kate had not been left behind, as he supposed would be the case, but was riding beside the chief.

"Some deep devilment of his, carrying the maiden with him," he muttered between his hard-shut teeth, and his eye again fell upon the dense line of horsemen.

First came a half-dozen scouts, some few hundred yards in advance, and then rode the chief and his fair captive, followed by a body-guard of a dozen men.

Behind them came Ford Balfour, at the head of the main force, numbering over a hundred men, and comprising the worst characters on the far frontier.

"A diabolical crew. Well, I'll make you understand that, strong as you are, Death is on your trail! But I must warn Edgerton, for his force is insufficient to drive off the vile set.

"Oh, I have it! I'll let them feel my vengeance to-night, and then fly away at Arab's topmost speed, and warn the officers at the fort and urge them to go on to Edgerton's aid, and the combined forces can then defeat this implacable outlaw fiend; but I pity that poor girl, and yet I will soon be back and endeavor to take her from their grasp."

While thus thinking, the Avenger had been leaning against his steed, but not once taking his eye from the passing line.

As soon as his mind was made up as to his course, the Masked Avenger bounded into his saddle, raised his rifle, and aiming directly into the dense crowd, fired once, twice, thrice, and so on, until every barrel of the weapon was discharged, and with an effect that was terribly felt in the crowded ranks.

Then away sped the fleet horse, like the wind, dashing through the forest for a mile or more, until he came to a place where the road wound around the base of a high hill.

"Yes; here is the place for another lesson," and he immediately set about reloading his rifle.

"No; I'll add to their superstition this time; it will aid me," he murmured, and placing his rifle again on his saddle, he unfastened from the other side the long bow and quiver of arrows, already spoken of.

He had not long to wait, for soon the noise of angry voices was heard, and the heavy tramp of hoofs, and around the bend came the head of the column, one and all discussing the daring man who had so persistently hung upon their trail, and brought death into their midst.

"Now!"

And with a word of caution to his faithful horse, the Avenger fitted an arrow to the bow, and taking aim, away sped the feathery, steel-pointed missile into the midst of the crowd of horsemen.

A shriek followed, a confused medley of voices, and the line halted, while cries arose for the chief to come forward.

Then, again and again, sped into the midst of the outlaws those silent messengers of death, until half a dozen had winged their flight in search of human life, and a howl of rage and fear arose, most terrible in its earnestness—a cry that brought a triumphant thrill of mingled bitterness and satisfaction to the Avenger, whose voice trembled slightly as he said:

"Now, Arab, prove your power, for forty miles lie between you and your next resting-place."

Away sped the splendid animal, in a long, swinging gallop, leaving behind in the outlaw band death and dread.

When the first shots of the Avenger had fallen into the midst of his men, Dante was infuriated almost to madness, and calling a halt, ordered a dozen men to scout the woods upon either side in search of their daring foe.

Then again the column moved on, and believing that the Avenger would be content with his vengeance until another opportunity of safety offered, the immediate dread of his presence was not felt, until, suddenly, a death-cry rung out, and an outlaw fell from his horse, and in rapid succession, with no sound of warning, others fell beneath the silent shots, and for a moment the entire column was threatened with a panic.

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed old Jane, whom Dante had forced to accompany Kate. "The Destroyer is on your path, chief, and Death is on your trail!"

"Woman, do you dare gloat over me? Take that, you hag!" yelled Dante, in a frenzy, and he drew a pistol and fired it directly into the face of the poor woman, who, with a moan, fell dead from her horse.

With horror, fear, and indignation, Kate for the moment could not speak; but at length she said:

"Murderer! assassin! you have slain a woman!"

Fortunately, the pistol-shot had caused the men to believe it a signal to fire upon their unseen foe, and the volley that followed, poured recklessly into the woods upon either side, drowned her words, or she also might have fallen beneath the vengeance of Dante, who was almost beside himself with rage.

"Leave her carcass where it lies; let the buzzards feast upon the hag and the men that have fallen. Move on ahead, and mind you keep a bright lookout!" yelled the chief, and again the column started on, each man in fear and trembling that his would be the next life sacrificed.

But, without other adventure, the outlaws continued their march, for like the wind their daring foe had sped away, holding his course straight through the forest, and then out over the rolling prairie.

On, on, on, in his long, sweeping gallop, Arab held his way, showing no sign of fatigue, and

scattering, by his untiring gait, mile after mile behind him.

At length the eastern sky grew rosy, and just at sunrise the distant line of forest came in view, and through the trees glittered the waters of a small river, while fluttering against the foliage was a red and white ensign—the flag of the United States.

On, still on, flew Arab, until the walls of the fort became plainly visible, and upon them food officers and soldiers, eagerly watching the approach of the horseman and his strange appearance.

At length the Avenger drew rein at the gateway, and saluting the officers, asked, in his stern, deep voice:

"Do I see before me the commandant of this fort?"

"I have that honor, sir," replied an officer with but one arm, and possessing a face frank and daring.

"I would speak with you, sir."

"Certainly; come within the fort."

"Let me first see to my horse, for in the last six hours he has brought me forty miles," said the Avenger, and at his words a part of the admiring glances bestowed upon the manly form and strange appearance of the master were transferred to the steed.

"My own man shall give him every attention, while you come with me. If I mistake not, I address a man who is rapidly becoming known as the Masked Avenger," said the commander of the fort.

"I am so called, sir. You are, I believe, Colonel Loring," returned the Avenger, as he gazed into the manly face of the daring soldier, who had left one arm on the field of Chapultepec, in Mexico.

"Yes, sir. I see we are both known to each other by reputation; I trust for the future it will be a friendly acquaintance. But come in, and while they are preparing you some refreshments, you can tell me in what manner I can serve you."

The Masked Avenger heartily accepted the kind hospitality of Colonel Loring, made known to him the circumstances with which the reader is already acquainted, and had the satisfaction of riding from the fort, a few hours after his arrival, accompanied by the gallant commandant and forty brave cavalry men, bound to the support of Captain Edgerton and his caravan.

For a few miles they rode along together, and then, while the squadron branched off to overtake the Prairie-men, the Masked Avenger set forth again to follow the trail of the outlaws to the bitter end, and leaving behind him a mystery regarding himself that neither Colonel Loring, his officers or men could solve; and all were the more exercised in their minds in not having caught sight of the face hidden beneath the mask of steel.

CHAPTER XIII. THE DEED OF DEEDS.

By taking a direction that he knew would cause him to meet the outlaws when about two days' march from their stronghold, the Masked Avenger reached, on the second day after parting with Colonel Loring, a spot but a few miles

distant from the grove where the attack had been made upon the Prairie-men.

Examining the trail carefully, he discovered the direction which the caravan had taken was as he had supposed, and observing that the outlaws had not yet come up, he devoted himself to rest, and preparations for the dangers and struggles before him.

He felt assured that the outlaws would encamp for the night in the grove, and prepare against the long miles of weary march before them, for from that point almost a seemingly limitless extent of plain land rolled westward, and both man and horse needed to refresh themselves for the journey.

"Now, Arab, old fellow, you must nerve yourself to bear more than you have yet, for, if I mistake not, you'll have to save the life of a young girl," said the Avenger, as he devoted himself to the steed, with almost brotherly affection.

Having seen that his horse needed no further attention, the Avenger took from his baversack bunches of jerked meat, and cooked a sufficient quantity to last two or three days, after which he set to work replenishing his quiver by making from hard wood growing in the grove, a number of arrows, edging them with feathers and barb-ing them with steel points which he carried in one of his saddle-pouches.

Then he rubbed up the bright point of his slender lance, primed every tube of his rifle and pistols, and looked to his saddle and bridle, to see that there was no flaw in either; after this, he climbed into one of the lofty trees growing upon the edge of the grove, and took a wide survey of the prairie in every direction, with his field-glass.

"Now for rest, for God knows I will need it," he said, and throwing himself upon the ground, he was soon lost in deep slumber, from which he did not awaken until the sun, low down upon the horizon, pierced the green retreat and shone brightly into his face.

With a start, at the length of time he had slept, he sprung to his feet and glanced around him.

Arab had eaten to his heart's content of the rich grass, and was also indulging in a *siesta*; the sun was just sinking into the prairie; the birds were trilling their evening songs, and all was beautiful, and yet with a sigh the Avenger turned away, saying:

"Yes, nature is beautiful indeed, and man's passions alone make life terrible, with all that is lovely around us for enjoyment! but I must not moralize, for yonder come my enemies, and my work must soon begin, my work of taking the life of my fellow-man."

"No; I cannot hesitate now; I have sworn it, and a terrible retribution will I wreak upon Dante and his followers."

"Ain I not satisfied? Have not a sufficient number fallen beneath my aim to glut my revenge?"

"Nol More must die; he must die, and in dread will I make him live from day to day."

"Little does he know who is the Masked Avenger! but he shall know, and then, and then—but I must work. Although they are three miles away, I have little time to spare."

"Come, Arab, old boy; the time is drawing

near for more action; we have both had rest sufficient to last us for some time, and we'll need it. Come."

The obedient and docile animal trotted up to his master and was ready in a few moments; then he was led into the further end of the grove and secreted in a deep gully, just as darkness came on, bringing with it the advance guard of the outlaws.

"Heaven is my friend," muttered the Avenger, as he descried from his place of concealment that the position chosen for Kate was within a few yards of him, and from the bright fires that were soon lighted throughout the grove, he discovered the weary look that was upon the pale and beautiful face.

With a sigh, the poor maiden threw herself down upon the greensward to rest, and glanced vacantly at the picturesquo scene around her, the dark, cruel faces of the men, lit up by the ruddy glare, the picketed horses, all making a picture worthy of an artist's brush, but one which she, in her loneliness and sorrow, found it impossible to appreciate.

As the Masked Avenger gazed, the chief strode into the bright light of the fire, and saluting the maiden, said, politely:

"Miss Edgerton, this grove is the scene of my defeat, when I attacked your brother's camp, some nights since, and here are buried a number of brave men."

"Whose lives are upon your hands, sir?"

"Perhaps—my trade is war, and war to the knife it shall be with me to the bitter end, for I hate man and woman-kind."

"I certainly have experienced the truth of what you say. Oh! if you have any mercy, let me go to my father and brother!" and the maiden raised her arms imploringly.

"Thither you are going. They cannot be more than four days' journey from here, and our horses can rapidly overhaul the wagons, which must needs go slow; but I would tell you that Texas Dave, the scout whom I sent after the Masked Avenger, just came into camp, being unable to find aught of him, yet, do you know, I believe he was here but a short while before we came? The smoldering embers of a fire were found, and the recent trail of a horse and rider."

"Perhaps he is going to make you again feel the weight of his arm?" answered the maiden; and then she continued, with evident scorn:

"I verily believe the Masked Avenger could put to flight your entire command."

The chief made no reply, but appeared in deep thought, while the Masked Avenger glanced cautiously into the grove from his hiding-place.

Excepting the chief, none other of the band were within twenty yards of the spot where Kate was reclining, and the outlaws were busy with their horses or cooking their evening meal.

The gully in which Arab stood arose a little above his back, and sloped away gradually for a few hundred yards until it shallowed off upon the prairie.

"Now is my chance to save her," said the Avenger, as he took in at a glance his advantages. "Without rest it will be a hard ride for her, but it is my last chance,

"Arab, you must befriend me now, for I cannot get her horse away."

So saying, the Avenger took from his saddle-horn his horsehair lasso, twirled it quickly around his head, launched it forth with a jerk, and the next instant Dante, the chief, was pulled to the earth with the coil tightening around his neck.

Kate was too startled to scream out, and seeing a form suddenly dart forward and place his knee upon the breast of the prostrate outlaw, but added to her fear, until in the uncertain light she recognized the Masked Avenger, and then hope came to her heart again.

"Be calm, lady! I do not intend to slay him, for his time to die is not now," said the deep tones of the Avenger, as he securely bound and gagged the helpless and almost senseless chief, whose surprise and sudden shock had deprived him of the power of resistance.

"Thank God, there is your horse!" exclaimed the Avenger, as the steed devoted to the use of the maiden came suddenly near the spot.

Unloosing his lasso from the chief, the next instant it was sent whirling around the neck of the animal, who was secured in a second's time and almost as quickly saddled.

"Now, quick! Down into the gully. Ha! we are discovered!"

And as the Avenger spoke, he drew Kate beneath the shelter of the bank, crying:

"Run down this gully, leading your horse, and I will be with you in an instant; for see, we are discovered!"

Realizing her position of danger, and that her chances of escape were in obeying promptly the wishes of the Avenger, Kate seized the rein, and drawing the animal after her, started at a fast run down the ditch, while her companion quickly sprung upon the back of his steed and threw forward his trusty rifle.

And just in time; for the excitement of catching Kate's horse had attracted attention to the spot, and a yell announced that the presence of the Masked Avenger had been discovered, for the light of the fire fell full upon him.

Hastily seizing their arms, a dozen outlaws rushed toward the spot, to be suddenly met with the fatal fire of the repeating-rifle, and a wild, defiant shout from their mysterious foe.

For an instant their career was checked, and taking advantage of their momentary delay, the Avenger darted away unhurt by the volley of balls poured after him by the frenzied outlaws.

At the mouth of the gulch he found Kate, already mounted and awaiting him, and his cool tones of encouragement, as he seized her bridle-rein and darted on, made her heart bound with hope and joy.

"You are not hurt? oh, you are not wounded?" she said, as she dashed on by the side of the mysterious man, and heard the howls of vengeance coming from the frenzied outlaws.

"Not at all. We have every hope of success, for I see your horse is fleet and has good wind, and when he gives out, Arab will distance those devils, carrying a double weight."

"Hark! they are in full pursuit!"

"Yes, they are after us, and can see us; but have no fear, for we can easily keep in advance and out of range of their guns."

"Yet they have several horses remarkable for speed."

"And I have a rifle here which will teach them caution," replied the Avenger, threateningly, and still flying on, he devoted himself to reloading the weapon.

Through the long hours of that weary night the fugitives pressed on, halting only now and then to give their horses a rest, and slowly distancing their pursuers, who had once been taught the range of the Avenger's rifle by approaching too near, when he had slackened speed for a while.

The night wore away, and daylight breaking discovered to the Masked Avenger that he was not pursued by a few of the outlaws but by the entire band, for at their head rode Dante and Ford Balfour, whose horses were known to be the best and fleetest of the plains.

"Well, Dante's in earnest, and determined that we shall not give long notice of his coming, for see, he is after us with every man," said the Avenger, pointing back over the prairie.

"Yes, and may God have mercy upon us."

"Lady, yonder gulch hides a spring, and there you must rest your horse and repose yourself for awhile, and I'll keep the demons at bay."

With perfect confidence in her companion, Kate Edgerton dismounted at the spring, which was sheltered by a single tree, bathed the distended nostrils of the tired horse, and performed the same office for Arab, which the Avenger had left with her, while he moved off across the prairie, and prepared to give his enemies a check for a few moments.

On they came at a racing pace, believing that his horses had failed them, and now the Avenger was at their mercy; but the glittering eye ran along the sights of his deadly rifle; a flash, a report, and an outlaw bit the dust, and at a distance they believed it impossible for a gun to kill.

Again and again the throat of steel poured forth its note of anger, and then the outlaws fell back.

In vain were the cries of their chief; his men would not follow him, and well he knew the utter uselessness of proceeding on with the aid alone of his lieutenant.

A consultation was then held among the outlaws, as they were thus kept in check, and long was the time ere some course was decided upon; but at length the force divided into three squadrons, one of which moved off to the right and the other to the left, under command of Ford Balfour and Texas Dave, while the larger body, under the chief, remained quiet.

"I see through your plan, you devils; you are going to surround my position; but I'll plot, too. Miss Edgerton, does your horse appear rested?" called out the Avenger.

"Yes; we both feel greatly refreshed after drink, food, and rest," answered Kate, cheerily, for nearly an hour had passed since they had first halted, and in that time she had, after devoting herself to watering and feeding the horses, partaken of food the Avenger had given her.

A moment more and the Avenger was by her side, and mounting in haste the fugitives dashed

away at a fair speed, and with renewed vigor, greatly to the surprise of the outlaws, who had believed their horses broken down.

A yell of disappointment was uttered when they discovered their mistake, and seeing, with bitter chagrin, the impossibility of his own horses continuing on without rest and water, the chief ordered a short halt, and with curses upon his ill luck, saw the fugitives disappear beyond a roll in the prairie.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE FUGITIVE'S RETURN.

WITH the last light of day the Masked Avenger again halted for rest, and this time there was no spring near, and the water in the canteens had to be given to the horses. Every attention was bestowed upon the steed ridden by Kate, for already he appeared broken down; indeed, he was completely so, and all efforts to make him rally were useless.

"Miss Edgerton, Arab will now have to show his powers of endurance, and believe me, he is equal to it," said the Avenger, approaching the spot where Kate was reclining upon the grass, for she was, also, almost prostrated with fatigue, excitement and hope alone keeping her up.

"My horse is no longer any use, then?"

"Not in the least, and I have, therefore, devoted my attention to Arab."

The maiden glanced into the eyes of the man before her, for, as yet, she had never seen him unmasked, and there was in her look such perfect confidence and belief in his power to save her, that the Avenger felt a great throb of pleasure at the thought, and said, in a cheerful manner:

"Arab has saved my life before, lady, by his speed and endurance, so have no fear. But come, you must take this to give you strength," and he took from his pocket a flask containing brandy, and pouring a small quantity in the cap of the flask, gave it to her to drink.

Without a word she drank it down, and in ten minutes more she was mounted behind the Avenger, and Arab, apparently unheeding his double weight, started on at the same long and sweeping gallop which he had kept up from the first, and which to him seemed untiring.

Now and then stopping to rest his steed, and then both dismounting and walking by the side of the noble animal, the hours dragged by, the miles were left behind, until, when day broke, the distant woodland could be seen, and after a while, the glimmer of the white tents was visible.

Then came to the ears of the tired fugitives one prolonged and ringing cheer, and from the forest poured forth a mass of happy people to welcome the wayfarers, and at their head came Wild Will, Colonel Edgerton, and Colonel Loring, who, with his band of troopers, had arrived the evening before.

It was a joyous meeting between brother and sister, father and daughter, while poor Kate, now that danger was over, and there was no need for a display of her strength, sunk into her brother's arms in a deathly swoon, completely used up by the numerous hardships and trials through which she had passed.

Many and numerous were the thanks be-

stowed upon the Masked Avenger by one and all, and in a few clear words he explained the circumstance of Kate's recapture, touching delicately upon his own part in the affair, and then marching off to devote his attention to Arab, whose hard trip had begun at last to show upon him.

"That man is a mystery to me, and I am determined to know more of him," said Wild Will, after he had borne his sister to the tent of Mrs. Gerard, who, with Edith, devoted themselves wholly to her restoration and comfort.

Walking to the spot chosen by the Avenger for his camping-place, for he had declined to accept the hospitality of any one, Wild Will, accompanied by his father and Colonel Loring, found their mysterious friend, still hard at work with his horse.

"You are devoted to your steed, I see," remarked Captain Edgerton, pleasantly.

"Yes, he deserves all I can do for him, for often has he saved my life," politely returned the Avenger.

"Is he American breed?" asked Colonel Edgerton.

"No, sir; Arab boasts a lineage from the fleetest racers on the desert."

"Indeed! He was imported into this country, then?"

"I brought him with me, for I purchased him when a mere colt, from his owner, an Arab Sheik."

"More mystery," muttered Wild Will, and then, as if ashamed of his curiosity, he continued:

"My dear friend, pardon me, but it is not my wish now or intention, to pry into the mystery of your life, or the circumstances attending your masking your face from the gaze of your fellow-men."

The Avenger ceased rubbing his horse, stood upright and bowed in reply, while Wild Will continued, earnestly:

"You have proven yourself possessed of peerless courage, and have rendered me services I can never forget, and as long as life lasts I am your friend; but I have come now for the purpose of asking your aid and advice in the combat that I know must follow the coming of Dante."

"Yes, he will arrive in a few hours now, but I doubt if he will attack before night, when men and horses have had rest—perhaps not until morning. He does not know that you have been reinforced by Colonel Loring, and is also ignorant of the force brought by your father; hence he may attack at once, or await until the morrow, trusting in his own strength, so I would advise you to keep half of your command hidden, as a reserve."

"A good idea. Let them make the attack, and resist with what force you have, Captain Edgerton; then your father, with his men, can join in, and with my troopers I'll be on hand to suddenly make a charge," remarked Colonel Loring.

Thus it was decided, and immediately the arrangements for the resistance of the attack were commenced, the Avenger promising to aid Wild Will, but reserving the right to be untrammled and form one of the charging squadron.

Ere long the advancing outlaws came in sight, and, as if tired out, encamped upon the prairie in full view of the traders, and Wild Will, the Masked Avenger and Colonel Loring rode around the lines, placing wagons in advantageous positions, and seeing that all was in readiness for the fray.

Darkness came on, and then it was evident that Dante had felt that his men and horses needed rest, ere they were brought into action, and would await until the morrow, for he certainly could gain nothing by a night engagement.

Asking Colonel Loring to accompany him, Wild Will, shortly after nightfall, sought the quarters of the Gerards, and were warmly welcomed by Mrs. Gerard and Edith Lynes, and also by Kate, who had sufficiently recovered from her indisposition to be able to join the social circle around the camp-fire.

At the request of all, Kate gave a full account of the stirring scenes through which she had passed, from the moment of her having been seized by Senor Alvez to her return to her brother's arms, and with surprise and admiration all listened to the deeds of the Masked Avenger, and, in wonderment, heard that the maiden had not once seen him unmasked.

"Can his face be terribly disfigured, that he thus hid it?" asked Mrs. Gerard.

"No, I think not. My theory is, that he is known to many of the outlaw band, and until the time comes does not wish them to know—Ha! my masked friend, we were just discussing you," and Wild Will arose and held out his hand to the Avenger, who, that moment, came forward.

"Indeed, I feel honored; but Captain Edgerton, I came to say that I am going to enjoy a short ride upon the prairie, to discover what our enemies are doing."

"You risk a great deal, sir."

"True; but I never let an opportunity go by to send one of Dante's band to eternity. Miss Edgerton, I am glad to see you recovered;" and the Avenger raised his broad sombrero, exposing to view the well-shaped head and clusters of dark hair.

Kate Edgerton instantly arose and offered her hand, saying, in her sweet tones:

"To you I owe too much to be repaid with thanks."

"Pardon, lady, but do not speak of it. Gentlemen, I will see you upon my return. *Adios.*"

Bowing low, the Avenger, without another word, mounted Arab, whose arching neck and impatient champing of the bit, proved that he had recovered his original strength and spirit. All watched the daring horseman as he rode away, watched the vanishing form until it disappeared in the gloom of the prairie, and then, still watching, they waited until suddenly there came a bright flash, a distant report, and, for an instant, the form of the Avenger was lit up, his steed reined back, and that terrible long-range rifle to his shoulder.

Then arose a wild halloo, angry voices, and again and again flashed forth the rifle, and once more all was silent for a while.

Standing in silent expectancy, there was heard the rapid clatter of hoofs, and in a few

moments more the form of a horseman was visible, and, quietly drawing rein, the Masked Avenger stopped in their midst, saying calmly:

"The attack will be made at daybreak. I suppose all is in readiness?"

"Yes, all; but you were under fire just now. I suppose you left your mark?" said Wild Will.

"I did."

And without another word, but with an earnest glance at Kate, the Masked Avenger rode back to the spot he had selected for a bivouac, leaving his friends still more mystified and struck with his strange behavior and remarkable character.

CHAPTER XV.

THE BATTLE.

WITH the first glimmer of dawn came the distant notes of the bugle, calling to "boots and saddles," and as the clear sound cut the crisp morning air, every man in the traders' encampment sprung to his feet with a determination to do or die.

Then was heard the sound of rushing hoofs, and in three separate columns came the outlaws dashing on to the attack, and in the early morning air looking like phantom horsemen, as they flew over the level prairie.

"To your posts, men! Stand firm!" cried the ringing voice of Captain Edgerton, and as his words were yet echoing through the woods, and the outlaws were still a long way off, one rifle-note broke the silence, and the fatal bullet flew onward and found a human target among the advancing horsemen.

It was the Masked Avenger who had fired the shot, and as the eyes of all turned upon him, and saw him seated, calm and stern, upon his horse, and noted the cool manner in which he fired and the deadly result, a wild cheer went through the ranks of the traders that was heard by their coming enemies.

A few moments more and the fight became general around the circle of wagons, and with telling effect both sides poured in their fire.

But, confident in their numbers, the outlaws pressed on and gradually gained an advantage, until, with a loud cry, the relief under Colonel Edgerton came to the rescue, and once more the traders were successful.

But, urged on by the loud curses of their chief, and encouraged by the voices of Ford Balfour and Texas Dave, the outlaws again made a gallant attack and drove the traders back to the shelter of their wagons, and following the lead of their wild chief, were gaining a decided advantage, when, with the set cheer of the regular soldier, the troopers, headed by their brave, one-armed colonel, dashed to the front, and once more the outlaws were crowded back and began to give ground.

"Hounds, will you let them drive you? They are but half your numbers, so beat them back—back, I say!" and, with yells of fury the outlaws regained courage.

Seeing that Texas Dave and Ford Balfour threw themselves into the breach behind their chief, once more they madly struggled for the mastery, and gained it, for before their onset the traders, soldiers and all gave back as before an avalanche that was irresistible,

Dante, unhorsed, bare-headed and frenzied, pierced the barrier and stood within the circle, his sword wielded with terrible effect, and his angry voice ringing with triumph.

"Oh, God! is all lost?" cried Wild Will, as he saw his men slowly giving way.

As he spoke, the stern, deep tones of the Masked Avenger smote on his ear, saying:

"Back, men, and give my weapon room! Dante, thou blood-stained wretch, here's your game."

All eyes fell upon the form of the Masked Avenger, and his presence checked the outlaws, as, springing from his horse he, with a few steps, faced the famous chief, whom none cared ever to meet in personal conflict.

"Yes, you are he whom I seek. Come on!" cried Dante, springing forward fiercely.

"Hold!"

At the deep voice there was a silence, and the Masked Avenger continued:

"Dante, let your life or mine hero settle this battle. Hold off your men until one or the other of us fall, and I will do likewise."

"Ay, ay! Cease your fighting, men, while I punish this cur," cried the chief, and bowing acquiescence, the Masked Avenger waved his hand to Colonel Loring and Wild Will to hold back their men, and, with one sweep of his cimeter, was in front of the outlaw leader, while all gathered around to await the issue.

Both were superb specimens of manhood, and in size and strength appeared equally matched.

The outlaw chief was armed with a huge cavalry saber, of fine steel, and red to the hilt with blood, while the gleaming cimeter of the Avenger bore no stain upon its glittering length.

The face of the outlaw was angry, fierce and terrible in its earnestness to slay the man before him, while the steel mask hid the features of the Avenger excepting the eyes, which burned brightly with a deadly light.

"Are you ready?"

"I am, Dante."

The weapons clashed with a force that sent sparks of fire in the circle around, and foot to foot commenced the deadly fray.

Backward and forward, with no word, no glance away from each other, their breath hard-drawn sighing an accompaniment to the clash of steel, the combat waged, neither one or the other gaining any apparent advantage, until, suddenly, the Avenger was seen to give ground, and a madder, wilder gleam of hatred flashed in the eye of Dante.

Step by step he gave back, until he could go no further and then all were startled by a sneering:

"Ha! ha! ha!" and the Avenger spoke.

"Dante, you fool, I've played with you sufficiently long, now you must die," and in spite of every effort of the chief, in spite of his great skill and strength, he was forced steadily back, and the entire manner of the Avenger changed; his parries and thrusts were like lightning; his movements were quicker and quicker, until, with another mocking laugh, his gleaming cimeter found its way to a vital part, and Dante, the renowned chief, lay dying on the trampled earth.

A wild wail went up from the outlaws, and, as one man, they turned and fled across the prairies in mad disorder, followed by a number of the victorious Prairie-men and troops.

Frenzied at the fall of his chief, Texas Dave refused to fly, but hurled himself upon the Masked Avenger, to be the next instant clove through the skull by the bloodstained cimeter, which was no sooner released than it was crossed by the weapon of Ford Balfour, who, though severely wounded, tottered forward to avenge his chief.

"Back, boy! I would not willingly harm you," cried the Masked Avenger, and he struck the lieutenant's sword from his grasp, and turned again toward the prostrate chief, around whom were now gathered a large number of the Prairie-men.

"Who in Satan's name are you?" groaned Dante, as he lay upon the ground supported by the arm of Colonel Edgerton.

"You would know who I am? Behold!"

As the Avenger spoke he tore from his features the mask that had so long covered them, and the handsome, fascinating face stood revealed.

A surprised exclamation was uttered by all present; but, above the sound arose the cry of the chief.

"Oh, God in heaven, is this thy just retribution? Does the grave give up its dead?"

"No, Malcolm Moore, I escaped death, and lived to bring you to this bitter end," said the deep voice of the Avenger.

"Malcolm Moore, who calls that name?" cried Mrs. Gerard, forcing herself through the crowd, accompanied by Edith Lynes.

Then, suddenly, her eyes fell upon the prostrate chief, and with a shudder, she said:

"Yes, 'tis Malcolm Moore! Dante the outlaw! but you are dying now, and, ere your eyes close in death, turn them once upon your daughter Edith, whose mother you so cruelly murdered—"

"No, no, no! He did not do that; his crimes are enough without that, God knows; Malcolm, do you not know me?"

With a bound Ford Balfour sprung forward, and tearing from his lips the dark mustache, and from his head the wig of dark hair, the pale, haggard but yet lovely face of a woman was revealed, looking almost girlish with its short, golden tresses.

"You, Ford Balfour, my lost wife? you my poor Edith?" and the outlaw half-raised himself from the ground, while, springing forward, the poor woman stood face to face with Mrs. Gerard.

"Edith, my daughter!"

"My mother, forgive me all, but I loved him so. I forsook you, my mother, you, my father, and you, my darling child, and followed him in disguise for long years.

"He knew it not; he never suspected me; but content to be near him, I became, like him, a bandit leader.

"Will God forgive me? Will you forgive me, mother, father, my child? Come, quickly—for—oh, God! the pain is here; Malcolm, my husband—my chief—"

With a shriek, wrung from a broken heart,

Edith Moore, the disguised Ford Balfour, the unfortunate wife, fell forward upon the body of her wounded husband, and her brave life flew away to another home.

For some moments no word was said, no sound was heard other than the deep sobs of Mrs. Gerard, and the maiden who thus had been brought face to face with her parents.

All stood in silence, their eyes ever and anon turned upon the wounded chief, the dead body of his wife, and the upright form of the Avenger, whose presence there proved that he too had suffered some deep crime from the dying man.

"Well, let all come now before me like avenging angels. Speak! Harold Meredith, and pour into listening ears the story of your life.

"You have hunted me down, you have reaped a rich harvest of lives to atone for the past, and bitter has been your vengeance.

"Speak, I say, and let these greedy ears know that you had just cause!" and the outlaw chief turned his dying gaze upon the Avenger.

"No, Malcolm Moore, I will not glout over your agony, nor triumph over you in your last moments. I have been avenged, although I have had to wash my hands in blood to gain my revenge. Die in peace, crime-stained man, and if you believe that God will hear your prayer, ask Him for mercy with your last breath."

Without another word the Avenger, whom the dying chief had called Harold Meredith, turned and walked away.

The chief followed his retreating form with his eyes; a livid look overspread his face; a convulsion of agony seized upon him, and, with his gaze turned toward poor Edith, and the words: "My daughter, forgive," upon his lips, his spirit, tainted and stained with the crimes done in the body, parted from its tenement of clay forevermore.

CHAPTER XVI.

A STORY OF THE PAST.

THE dead were buried, the wounded cared for, and in the same grave were placed the remains of Malcolm Moore and his heartbroken wife, who in disguise had proven her deep woman's devotion.

With his troopers, Colonel Loring had followed the demoralized outlaws to their stronghold, which he demolished, and again returned to his frontier fort to win new laurels, fighting beneath the flag of his country.

Wild Will, the dashing Prairie commander, had soon set his caravan to rights, and a few days after the battle, the train was once more *en route* to its destination.

Mrs. Gerard, in the love of her granddaughter, rapidly recovered from the shock she had received, while Edith, who hardly remembered a mother's love was comforted in her deep sorrow by the devotion of her grandparents and the warm affection of Wild Will, whom she idolized, girl as she was, with as deep adoration as he felt for her.

To Captain Edgerton, Osmund Gerard had told the strange story of his daughter's early life, when, as a mere school-girl, she had met and loved the handsome Malcolm Moore, a

young physician, who had settled in their native town, and whom every one at first trusted and believed to be all that was noble, but at last found out that he was a wild fellow who had run away from home, years before, and become a wayward wanderer.

Then came the sad story of the runaway marriage of Edith and Malcolm Moore, the pursuit, and attempted murder of Mr. Gerard by the reckless youth, and his flight to a foreign land, while his deserted wife again became an inmate of her childhood home, to give birth there to the little Edith, whom she deserted years after to go none knew whither, some believed to take her own life, others thought to seek her miserable husband, of whose whereabouts none knew.

The story of Edith's early life but bound the maiden more firmly to the noble heart of Wild Will, and offering his heart and hand, he was promised that she should be his wife as soon as she became sixteen, for the Prairie-man declared he would give up his roving wild life, settle down on a ranch, and become a respected member of society.

But there was one in the train of traders and emigrants around whom a mystery yet hung, and that was Harold Meredith, he who had won, by his terrible vengeance upon the outlaw band, the name of the Masked Avenger.

No longer did he go masked; no longer did he eagerly seek the lives of his fellow-men; but, as the guest of Wild Will, continued on with the caravan, devoting many hours of each day and evening to the society of Kate Edgerton, who seemed to hold his destiny in the hollow of her little hand.

Thus days passed on, and the end of the journey was drawing near, when, one lonely moonlit evening, the train being encamped in an almost earthly Eden, and all around invited to love and enjoyment, Harold Meredith sought Kate Edgerton and asked her to walk with him.

She readily accepted, for her heart told her that the time had come when she would know the mystery that hung over the life of the strange man, whom, though all in the caravan admired and loved for his nobleness of character and heart, they yet feared, or looked upon with a certain awe.

Halting in their walk upon a spot overlooking the moonlit river, and a valley beyond, Harold Meredith said, in the deep, but musical tones usual to him:

"I have brought you here, Miss Edgerton, to tell you a story of the past; to reveal to you the circumstance that made me the Masked Avenger; and though I do not doubt but that my deeds may cause you to judge me severely, yet I beg of your forgiving nature pardon and mercy.

"Years ago—twelve have passed now since the time I would speak of—I lived in a lonely home on the banks of the Red River, and was blessed with kind parents, a younger brother, and a sister, then in her nineteenth year, and as beautiful as an angel.

"I idolized, not loved, that fair sister, and all the rest of the affection of my nature gave to my parents and brother.

"One evening there came to our home a wayfarer, a young man of wonderful presence, fascinating address, and courtly manners.

"He informed us that he was a physician, a man of wealth, and was seeking a home in our Southwestern clime, for the chill winds of the North he did not like.

"He was warmly welcomed, and we became as brothers.

"Together we roamed over the Western plains, and became as expert Indian-fighters as we were buffalo-hunters, for I had spent, young as I then was, years in these Western wilds.

"Two years passed, and having settled in our neighborhood and respected by all, the man I speak of became the husband of my pure young sister; and that marriage appeared to make them both happy.

"At this time a bachelor brother of my mother, a waif, as it were, who had floated around the world for years, sent for me to come and join him in London, and make with him an Eastern tour.

"Intoxicated with delight at the prospect of travel, and possessed of ample means, I bade a sad farewell to all at home and departed.

"I was warmly welcomed by my uncle, and together we started for the East.

"After years of wandering together, my uncle and myself found ourselves in New-Zealand, and joining a party of English officers upon a raid against the natives, who had of late committed a number of cruel depredations against the settlers, we found ourselves separated one evening from the remainder of the forces, accompanied by but two other persons—a young lieutenant and a courier.

"We were comparatively unacquainted with the geography of the country, and being surrounded by dangers upon every side, knew not which way to turn in safety, for the yells of the maddened savages, and the lights of their camp-fires warned us to be most cautious, or discovery and certain death would follow.

"I am selecting from my life, Miss Edgerton, this one particular episode, to explain how fate at length led me on; how a cruel destiny dogged my footsteps, for there has been much in my wayward career that is pleasant, and my days have not always been tinged with sorrow; no, in early life, in my boyhood years, my every cloud seemed to have a silver lining; but with that time, when I foolishly, in company with my uncle, who really seemed more like a brother to me, commenced the "beginning of the end," which brought about the bitter to-day of my existence, an I made me what I have been of late, a man of deadly hatred, the Masked Avenger.

"But, to go on with my story, for I would that you should know every palliating circumstance in my life, and as readily would I confess to you every evil as well as every virtue, for believe me, I have not been wholly sinning, and the teachings of my dear old mother, when I left a mere boy, beside her knee, did not fade entirely away, even though years had gone by since then, and thousands of miles divided mother and son; the seed sown in youth brought forth some good fruit.

"Well, we four held a council of war, as it were, there in that gloomy jungle, and decided to attempt by boldness and surprise, what we could not accomplish were our numbers known, so at once set about preparations to dash pell-

mell through the lines of the savages, who, as I before stated, entirely surrounded us.

"We were well mounted, and all four armed with swords and revolvers, so, settling ourselves well in our saddles, and tightening our grasp upon the reins, we moved forward, the lieutenant leading the way, and my uncle following, and the courier and myself bringing up the rear.

"On we rode for half a mile, and then the ruddy camp-fires and naked, hideous forms of the savages, dancing and gesticulating in wild frenzy and rage, burst full upon us.

"For a moment we hesitated, and glanced upon the terribly picturesque scene, for as yet we were undiscovered, and then, with set teeth and an inward prayer, drove our spurs deep into the sides of our good steeds.

"One yell of surprise and terror burst from the savages which we answered with shouts of defiance, and the next instant we were in their midst, firing and cutting right and left.

"But our small party was soon discovered, and with yells of hatred the savages rallied and poured around us, and beneath their blows the courier, who had fought nobly, fell dead from his horse, and my uncle reeled in his saddle from a spear-thrust in his side.

"On we pressed, however, I striking right and left with one hand and supporting my wounded uncle with the other, while the brave young Englishman seemed a tower of strength in his bold efforts to break through.

"But all seemed useless, for suddenly my uncle received a blow from a *boomerang*, the crescent-shaped weapon you have often seen me use, Miss Edgerton, and he fell from his horse, a dying man.

"I instantly drew rein, for I could not leave him there to die; no, better to perish with him; but, as I did so, I also received a severe wound—a spear-thrust in the side, and unable to strike up the deadly weapon, I was unhorsed and fell beside my uncle.

"The Englishman at once wheeled his horse and was cutting his way toward us, when, unwilling to see the brave man die while a chance of escape remained to him, I called out that my uncle could live but a few moments, and that doubtless my wound was mortal, so he must save himself if he could.

"The brave young officer hesitated an instant, then exclaimed aloud:

"Too bad, too bad; farewell, my poor, poor friends!" and wheeling his horse, by magnificent horsemanship and desperate courage, broke through the ranks of his howling enemies, and, as I afterward learned, escaped in safety, to report the death of my uncle and myself, and, being acquainted with my name and residence in America, he wrote the sad news home to my parents.

"No sooner had the lieutenant disappeared from sight than my uncle and myself were surrounded by a band of yelling savages, howling in triumph at their success and our fall, while they pressed forward with lance and club to take our lives.

"Believing that I had to die, I staggered to my feet determined to sell life dearly, when suddenly my uncle raised himself upon his elbow,

and made a few strange gestures, while at the same time he cried out in a loud voice, and in a language wholly unknown to me.

"The effect upon the savages was wonderful. Instantly their howlings ceased, and with bowed heads and low mutterings they fell back, until we were left in the center of a small circle lying in the full light of a blazing fire.

"I turned to my uncle for an explanation, and saw that he was dying, but he told me in broken tones that years before he had been a prisoner among those same savages, but having saved the life of their chief, they had made him one of their tribe and initiated him into their secret organizations.

"It was the symbolical words he had uttered that at once had commanded the respect and attention of even savage nature, for no longer did they appear desirous of seeking our lives, but, on the contrary, were anxious to do all in their power to aid us.

"To hasten on with my story, we were taken to their wretched hovels, and received every kindness, but the wounds of my uncle were mortal, and there, in that desolate jungle, in a foreign land, away from the loved ones of his childhood, he died, and found a grave.

"Weeks after I recovered from my wound, and one dark night stole away from the savage hospitality of my captors, and after numerous hardships and sufferings, once more reached the marts of civilization and was safe.

"My uncle left me his heir, and in settling legal matters in London, I was detained for some time, so that eight years had passed ere I again stood in my native State.

"With mingled feelings of joy and hope I started homeward, and, arriving there late one evening, found it in ruins.

"But, worse to tell, that very day a terrible deed had been done, for, by the yet burning embers, I recognized the forms of those that had been so dear to me—my aged parents weltering in their blood, my brother hanging dead to a tree, while near by lay the forms of my poor murdered sister and her two children.

"I fell to the ground, like one dead, and the coachman who had driven me home, raised me in his arms and bore me to a neighbor's house, where I lay in wild delirium for weeks.

"At length I recovered and asked who had done that deed, and was told it was my brother-in-law.

"A few months before a woman had come to the home place claiming to be, and proving, that she was his wife, and this had raised the hand of my parents, sister, and brother against him.

"He had fled from justice, leaving my sister and her two children, and had leagued himself with a band of desperadoes on the frontier, and soon became their chief.

"Determined to wreak vengeance upon those whose crime was in trusting him, the human demon returned, with his band of outlaws at his back, and dealt the foul deed that had met my vision.

"By this act he believed he had slain our entire family—wiped out the race from the face of the earth, for you will remember that, at the time my uncle was killed, in New Zealand, it

was also reported that I had lost my life, and he, therefore, believed me dead.

"I left my home—my ruined home, and bringing with me my faithful Arab, a horse I had brought with me from the East, and equipping myself with various arms, I set forth to look for the murderers of all that were dear to me.

"At length my search was successful, and I studied well every foot of the country; I practiced daily with every weapon of defense and offense, and at length took the trail of the outlaws and haunted it like death.

"Malcom Moore, Dante, and he that did me that foul wrong, were one and the same.

"Am I not most cruelly avenged?"

CHAPTER XVII.

WATCHING AND WAITING.

WHEN Harold Meredith ceased speaking, a silence of some moments followed, the man standing upright, his arms folded upon his broad breast, and his gaze fastened upon the beauty of the scenery, seemingly; while in reality he was looking back over the years that had brought to him so much of misery, and clinging, with one golden anticipation—one buoyant hope, to a love-dream, in which even his life might be blessed by the affection of a true and noble woman.

The maiden sat in silence upon the broad trunk of a fallen tree, her eyes cast down, her face pale in the moonlight, and the lips tremulous with the current of thought that overwhelmed her, for her every feeling of womanhood had been touched by the strange story she had listened to from him whom she had learned to love with all the passionate abandon of a warm and loving nature.

Soon Kate Edgerton raised her beautiful eyes, in which tears were trembling like dewdrops in the moonlight, and met the full, earnest gaze of Harold Meredith fixed upon her with a meaning and tenderness she could not fail to discover.

"Miss Edgerton, I have placed my life, like an open book, before you.

"If you can read therein aught that can find favor in your eyes—if you will look upon the palliating circumstances that stirred up the bitterest feelings of hatred and led me to a life of—of crime, shall I say?—then, so looking, could you find that my heart's devotion to you will kindle for me one tiny flame of love in your bosom, it will be a joy untold, and one that will bring to me a pleasure I had believed forever flown, and drive away the haunting memories of the past which now hover around me in all my sleeping and waking hours."

The Avenger paused, and his earnest eyes fell, with penetrating eagerness, upon the bowed form and head of the beautiful woman before him, who, slowly rising from her seat, let her hands steal upward until they were clasped around the proud neck of Harold Meredith.

Then the full, ripe lips were raised to his, and the low but firm murmur, "Harold, I love you better than life," made the lonely, sorrow-stricken man cast his gloom and his bitter memories into the past, and live, in joyful anticipation, ages of delight in the happy present.

An hour passed, and then the lovers retraced their steps to the camp, and made known to the

father and brother what had taken place between them.

Anxious for Kate's happiness, and having discovered how dearly she loved the Avenger, Colonel Edgerton and Wild Will heartily gave their sanction to the engagement between the two, and it was agreed that they should be married as soon as the object of the present expedition was accomplished.

The destination of the caravan was reached, the goods disposed of, and with full pockets and in glad humor, the Prairie-men started upon the homeward march, and each night, as they camped along the way, the camp was boisterous with revel and song.

But, though apparently reckless, the Prairie-men were constantly on the alert in their march homeward, for they knew not but that the remainder of the outlaw band might meditate revenge for their severe defeat and the death of their chief.

Among those most anxious regarding an attack was Harold Meredith, who determined to keep a bright lookout for any appearance of danger, for he was fearful lest some accident or misfortune might yet tear from him the woman he loved with an almost idolatrous worship.

Well knowing the entire country, Harold was wont to reconnoiter on the march miles in advance of the train, which now consisted of only the Prairie-men and our immediate friends, as the emigrants, and those who had been traveling with the caravan as a protection, had remained behind, and hence the number was greatly diminished.

In one of these scouting trips, Harold suddenly discovered fresh tracks, indicating that a number of horsemen had recently passed in that direction, and observing that many of the horses were shod, he felt convinced that it was a party belonging to the outlaw band.

Following rapidly on the trail, he came, in an hour's time, in sight of a small grove of trees, and dismounting, he tied his steed and cautiously crept to a position whence a good view could be obtained of the horsemen, who had halted for their midday rest and lunch.

"As I expected, they belong to the outlaw band—doubtless are those that escaped from the stronghold after the attack on it by Colonel Loring," murmured the Avenger, for already the news of the demolition of the outlaw camp had been brought to the Prairie-men by Indian runners.

"Some thirty in number," he continued, after counting them as well as he could, "and determined to ambush us at our next encampment; and— Ha! I am discovered."

With a bound Harold Meredith sprung to his feet, at a sound of crashing brush behind him, and the next instant his noble horse, with reins hanging loose, went dashing by, pursued by two Mexicans at full speed.

Placing his hand to his lips, the Avenger gave a loud, piercing whistle, which caused the horse to wheel to one side, and immediately dash in the direction of the call.

"Here, my good steed—here!" cried Harold, as the horse halted beside him; and, with a bound and a defiant yell, he was in the saddle and flying away from the encampment, followed

by the Mexicans and the entire outlaw band, who had been warned of his presence by the loud whistle and the cries of the two men who had been in pursuit of the noble steed.

"Come on, you red devils, and I'll show you I've not lost my cunning with my mask," cried the Avenger, and halting suddenly, he raised his trusty rifle, for he still carried all of the arms which he had when first introduced to the reader.

The flash and report found an echo in a death-cry, and again flew horse and rider at wild speed.

On, on, on, for miles until, just as the distant train came in sight, an unfortunate shot from one of the outlaws brought the brave steed to the ground, and Harold was thrown with such force against the earth, as for the moment to stun him.

But, recovering himself as quickly as possible, he turned to meet his exultant foes, who, in a long string, were rushing upon him, believing, now that the Avenger's steed was dead, they would find him an easy prey.

Placing his shield upon his left arm, and loosening his cimeter and pistols ready for use, Harold Meredith stood ready, his trusty rifle in hand, to meet his destiny, bring it life or death, and his face, though pale, was firm and cool, while the glitter of his eye was threatening and deadly.

On rushed the outlaws, drawing nearer and nearer, and with loud cries and wildly-aimed shots, attempting to intimidate the foe they so greatly feared, and whom they were most anxious to slay ere he received aid from the distant train, for already the gallant Prairie-men were hastening in hot haste to the rescue, having witnessed the chase and fall of the Avenger's horse.

Gradually the trusty rifle began to flash forth its angry fire and send its deadly hail into the midst of the coming renegades; but, though the aim proved true, and ever and anon an outlaw or his steed bit the dust, the mass pressed on in recklessness of danger, so anxious were they to wreak their vengeance upon one who had proven the most deadly foe to their band.

En masse they rushed upon the gallant man, who, single-handed, daringly met the assault, his revolvers ringing out sharply until every shot was expended, and then casting them aside, he drew his cimeter, and protecting himself with the shield upon his left arm, as well as he could, he sprung into the midst of his foes, at once acting upon the offensive instead of as before, defensive.

It was a terrible combat, and several times the Avenger met with severe wounds, but cheered by the encouraging cries of the Prairie-men, who were pressing to his rescue at mad speed, he fought bravely against terrible odds, and caused many a reckless outlaw to feel the weight of his keen weapon.

But now, when the last glimmer of hope was flickering, for his strength was failing him, his ears caught the cry of the Prairie-men, who, the next moment, darted upon the scene and put the remaining outlaws to flight across the plains.

"Wild Will, I thank you; my friends, I—you have—" began the Avenger, but faint from loss

of blood from several wounds, he could say no more, but fell back into the arms of Captain Edgerton.

Tenderly the wounded man was borne back to the train, which had encamped in the mean time, and his wounds were skillfully dressed, while the loving hands of Kate Edgerton soothed his brow, and the magic touch brought him back to consciousness.

Weeks passed ere the Avenger was once again able to travel, and through those dreary days of sickness and suffering he was cared for by one and all with tender sympathy, while poor Kate scarcely left his side.

Not a murmur of regret was heard among the generous Prairie-men at the long delay, for as a brother they had learned to love the gallant stranger who had come into their midst, and his stay becoming known, they gave him all the sympathy which the hearts of noble men can feel.

At length the boundaries of civilization were reached, the Prairie-men were dispersed, and the Gerards and Edgertons, with Harold Meredith, sought a temporary home in a Southwestern city.

In one of the loveliest portions of the State of Texas, was built, a few years after the incidents related in the foregoing chapters, two lovely homes, surrounded by every luxury, and the abode of happiness.

The mansions are not far distant from each other, and a short walk with the kind reader will make him aware of the fact that old friends are their inmates.

First, in that lordly residence on the hill, surrounded by ornamented grounds, dwell Captain Edgerton and his lovely bride—Wild Will and Edith Lynes—while, watching over the happiness of their children, are Osmund Gerard and his wife, who, after the sorrows of their younger years, are reaping the blessings of a quiet old age.

In the stately mansion in the valley, and shaded by majestic trees, live in peaceful enjoyment Harold Meredith and Kate Edgerton, as man and wife, for the beautiful maiden, with the sanction of her brother, and blessing of her dying father, gave her hand and heart to him that was once known as the Masked Avenger.

THE END.

Edward L. Wheeler's
Deadwood Dick Novels
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